

The Western Balkans Frontline of the migrant crisis

SUMMARY

2015 was a landmark year in the history of migration to Europe, with an unprecedented and constantly increasing flow of migrants making their way to the European Union. Fleeing poverty and war mainly in the Middle East and Africa, more and more people embarked on perilous journeys to reach the safety of Europe. In 2015, there was a significant surge in migrant transits across the eastern Mediterranean and the Western Balkans. The EU Member States bordering the Mediterranean Sea shared the challenge of the influx with other Member States and the Western Balkan countries, in particular the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia.

The 1990s wars in the Western Balkans triggered a mass exodus to other parts of Europe, which has had long-lasting consequences for the region. While today the Western Balkans remain a substantial source of migration, in the current context they are mainly a transit route. Countries in this particularly sensitive region have less-advanced welfare systems, limited institutional capacity and struggling economies that are further strained by having to provide for large numbers of transiting migrants. Having activated dormant political conflicts in the region, these developments risk turning into a major destabilising factor. In all likelihood, the crisis will last and the Western Balkans will remain a busy migrant route. This puts relations between the EU and the Western Balkan enlargement countries in the spotlight and makes the case for increased cooperation in a situation of mutual dependence. While the EU is already providing technical, humanitarian and financial assistance to the Western Balkans, it needs to come up with a coordinated approach focused not only on short-term measures, but also on the long-term consequences for the region, including their impact on the enlargement process as a whole.



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The 1951 [UN Geneva Refugee Convention](#) defines refugees as people fleeing conflict or persecution. People who apply, or intend to apply, for asylum on these grounds, but whose applications are pending, are called 'asylum-seekers', whereas 'refugees' are those who have already been granted asylum. 'Refugees' is however often used more broadly in the media, to cover all those part of a flow, as in the present case, from a country/region stricken by conflict, irrespective of their legal status. The concept of 'economic migrants' has also gained prominence in recent years. Their primary motivation is considered to be economic gain. In Europe there is ongoing debate as to whether it faces a ['refugee' or an 'economic migrant'](#) crisis. Refugees and economic migrants are often labelled with the same term – 'migrants', but they are subject to different laws and levels of protection. The difficulty of drawing a distinction between them, as well as their many shared characteristics, has brought the term ['mixed migration'](#) into use.

Roots of the migrant crisis

Refugee movements towards Europe are not a new phenomenon. Depending on the areas of conflict from which they have sought to escape, refugees have reached Europe via different routes. In 2005, thousands of sub-Saharan African refugees used the Spanish enclaves of [Ceuta and Melilla](#) as their major entry point to the EU via the western Mediterranean. In 2011, civil unrest in Tunisia and the [fall of the Gaddafi regime](#) in Libya spurred massive movements on the [central Mediterranean route](#) to the Italian island of Lampedusa. In 2014, refugee numbers reached a [staggering level](#), marking a record for the EU. At present, the most intense armed conflicts in the world are in the Middle East and Africa. The [2015 Fragile States Index](#) places countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, the Central African Republic, Syria and Afghanistan atop the global list of humanitarian emergencies. Having started in 2011, the Syrian conflict is now among the [strongest drivers](#) for refugees coming to Europe (according to [Eurostat](#) around 29% of all refugees are Syrian). Around 4 million Syrians have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt, facing dire living conditions, restricted movement and no right to work. Other conflicts, including those in Somalia and Eritrea, [have also displaced millions](#). Poor governance and lack of political accountability are yet other reasons why people – 'economic migrants' – flee. Thus, a mix of violence, dysfunctional political systems, decreasing international aid and globalisation in general, are all triggers that push more and more people to cross borders.

The ['Western Balkan route'](#) is composed of two migratory flows: one from the Western Balkan countries themselves and another of migrants having entered the EU (Bulgaria or Greece) via Turkey by land or sea, with the aim of reaching the Schengen area.

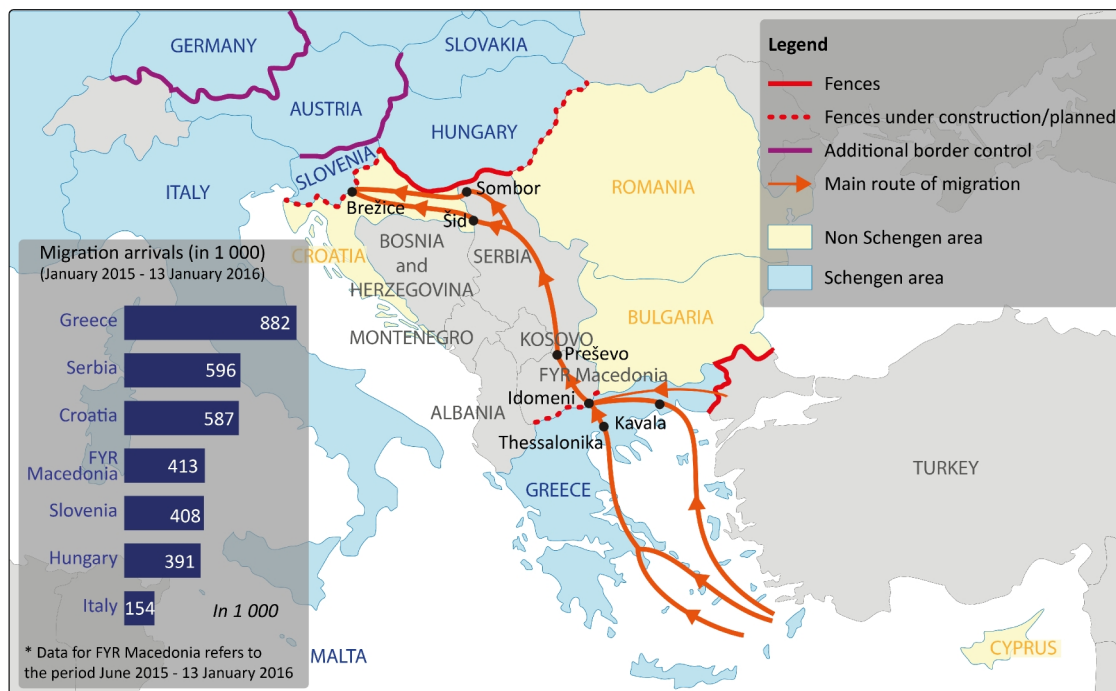
The Western Balkan route

In 2015, of the [main migratory routes](#) to Europe by land and sea, that across the Western Balkans was the busiest. Starting in Turkey, the route heads west into Greece and then into the Western Balkans, at present primarily via the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia. The region's aspiring EU candidates, particularly Kosovo¹ and Albania, have largely been a source of irregular migration themselves, with a [peak](#) of border crossings in 2014 and early 2015. Increasing migrant flows from outside Europe, however, have shifted the trend, turning the region into a transit one. Some of the contributing factors include:

- Migrant flows stemming mainly from the Middle East and more broadly, Asia,
- The strategic geopolitical position of the Western Balkans,
- The construction by Greece (2012) and Bulgaria (2014) of fences along their borders with Turkey, which [diverted](#) most migrants to sea routes,

- The lower risk/cost compared to the 'deadly' central Mediterranean route,
- The introduction of visa-free travel within the EU for Western Balkan countries.

Figure 1 – Migration arrivals in the EU in 2015



Map by Giulio Sabbati, EPRS; Data source: International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)), 2015.

The new route is shorter, since for the majority of migrants, who come from the Middle East, Turkey is within [easier reach](#) than Libya. Although not devoid of [peril](#), this route is also considered safer: sea trips from Turkey to the Greek islands have been successful for tens of thousands of people. Challenges on the road include [new fences](#) along borders and unpredictable reactions by the affected countries, which [additionally burdens](#) transit countries and leads to secondary routes within the region.

What the Western Balkan countries are doing

Despite the fact that the Western Balkan countries have [relevant laws](#) and migration management systems in place, the high number of refugees crossing their territory has [put a strain](#) on their legislation, asylum systems and migration policies. The EU has bilateral [readmission agreements](#) with Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The challenges relate to ensuring consistent implementation of the relevant legislation, sufficient capacity for receiving migrants and compliance with international standards.

Legal frameworks in the Western Balkans

Although largely harmonised with the EU *acquis*, the legislative and institutional frameworks for migration management need further adjustment. All the countries have adopted [three types of relevant laws](#) regulating: 1) foreigners/aliens, 2) state border control, and 3) the revision of the criminal code so as to criminalise migrant smuggling and to assign penalties. They also have key strategic documents defining the priorities, main objectives and measures related to managing irregular migration and illegal stay.

The national asylum procedures in the region differ in a number of ways, for example as regards the steps involved in the asylum procedure and the grounds for granting or refusing asylum. In Albania and Kosovo, asylum-seekers cannot express their intention

to request protection prior to submitting a formal request. In BiH and Serbia, asylum-seekers can express such an intention, after which they are obliged to formally do so within a determined timeframe. Recent changes have also made this possible in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. However, the vast majority of refugees only spend a limited time in the Western Balkans and [rarely submit](#) asylum requests.

Table 1 – Key laws that define/regulate international protection in WB countries (IOM, 2014)

FYR Macedonia	Law on asylum and temporary protection
Albania	Law on asylum, on the integration and family reunion of persons granted asylum in the Republic of Albania
Serbia	Law on asylum of the Republic of Serbia
Montenegro	Law on asylum of Montenegro
BiH	Law on the movement and stay of foreigners and on asylum
Kosovo	Law on asylum

Note: New laws on asylum are being drafted in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, BiH and Montenegro, and in Serbia.

Table 2 – First-instance institutions deciding on asylum requests (IOM, 2014)

FYR Macedonia	Asylum Department at the Ministry of Interior
Albania	Directorate for Nationality and Refugees at the Ministry of Interior
Serbia	Office for Asylum at the Ministry of Interior
Montenegro	Office for Asylum at the Ministry of Interior
BiH	Asylum Department at the Ministry of Security
Kosovo	Department of Citizenship, Asylum and Migration at the Ministry of Interior

National and regional dialogue and practical cooperation are necessary to address the situation in the region. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the IOM, as well as multiple NGOs, support governments in developing initiatives and good practices on refugee protection and international migration. Examples include the Balkans Asylum Network (BAN), established to contribute to asylum-related capacity-building of civil society in the region, as well as the Migration, Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative ([MARRI](#)), created under the former Stability Pact for south-eastern Europe. There are also several regional consultative processes with migration-related agendas, such as the [Budapest](#) and [Prague](#) processes. Initiatives aimed at regional cooperation on migration issues are also undertaken by the South-east European Law Enforcement Centre ([SELEC](#)), the International Law Enforcement Cooperation Unit ([ILECU](#)), and within the framework of the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe ([PCC](#)). The IOM issued a '[response plan](#)' for the period September-December 2015, in which it promoted regional approaches to addressing mixed migration flows. Together with UNHCR, the IOM leads the Western Balkan Initiative on refugee protection and international migration. UNHCR has put in place a [targeted protection and humanitarian response](#) in support of the governments and civil society, which includes enhanced monitoring and presence at exit and entry points. At the same time, UNHCR has engaged in the provision of basic humanitarian assistance, legal and social counselling, and information dissemination and interpreting through its local partners. Public advocacy, awareness-raising and community engagement have also been stepped up.

Serbia: state of play

Since the 1990s, Serbia has [hosted the largest displaced population](#) in Europe. Now it is mainly a transit country, in which migrants spend two days on average. With [over 595 000 arrivals](#) since January 2015, and with the closing of borders by neighbouring

countries, its capacity has been [exceeded](#) and its situation has been [aggravated](#) further. To cope, the government set up a [working group](#) in June and adopted a [plan](#) in September 2015. Overall, Serbia's actions (open borders policy, political discourse, public attitudes) are seen as 'refugee-friendly', despite reported [cases](#) of mistreatment. The [2015 Commission progress report](#) commended the country in that respect.

Legal and Institutional framework, reception centres

The [Constitution](#) of Serbia guarantees the right to asylum, primarily regulated by the 2008 [Law on asylum](#). Migration is regulated by the Law on foreigners (2008), Law on state border protection (2008), Law on migration management (2012) and Law on employment of foreigners (2014). Relevant strategies are also in place, such as the Strategy for combating illegal migration (2009-2014), among others. In the framework of Serbia's screening process with the EU, the [action plan for Chapter 24](#) notes that asylum legislation is partly compliant with the EU *acquis* and outlines areas to be addressed. In 2013, the Ministry of Interior mandated a project group to draft proposals for a new asylum law, expected to be adopted in the first half of 2016.

Several [state authorities](#) have [competences](#) regarding migration: the Ministry of Interior (Asylum Unit and Aliens Department), the Asylum Commission, the Ministry of Justice (the Administrative Court), the [Commissariat for Refugees and Migration](#), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Policy. The 2008 Law on asylum foresees the establishment of an Asylum Office. Not yet officially established, it currently operates on an ad hoc basis. NGOs and international organisations such as [UNHCR Serbia](#), the [Serbian Red Cross](#), [Asylum Info Centre](#), the [Belgrade Centre for Human Rights](#), [Praxis](#), the [Danish Refugee Council](#), [Caritas](#), and [Group 484](#), are also relevant stakeholders. UNHCR cooperates closely with the European Commission, the EU's external borders management agency ([Frontex](#)) and the European Asylum Support Office ([EASO](#)).

Currently, refugees along Serbia's borders can get help and services at [several aid points](#). The country has five reception centres with limited capacity; in 2015, a [One Stop Centre](#) was opened in Preševo.

Ongoing relevant projects include [Group 484's](#) 'Networking and capacity-building for a more effective migration policy in Serbia', 'Towards the Europeanisation of Serbia – improving the legislative framework, established policies and practices in the areas of asylum and readmission in the Republic of Serbia', and 'Improving migration policy in Serbia and countries of the Western Balkan'. In broad terms, they aim to boost the engagement of civil society organisations and raise awareness. Overall, the EU-funded projects aim to expand existing accommodation capacity and assist in drafting the new asylum law, reforming the asylum system, and further developing the border surveillance systems. Serbia has been [encouraged](#) to build additional centres with EU support. It has expressed willingness to take part in the EU quota system for refugees, and [readiness to follow](#) a common EU approach. It has, however, emphasised the need for a joint EU response and a uniform regional approach to the definition, rights and benefits of refugees.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: state of play

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia also has a history of hosting refugees, both in the 1990s and after the 1999 Kosovo conflict. To keep track of the unprecedented migration movements, the Ministry of Interior issues [daily reports](#); in October, [record levels](#) of about 10 000 daily arrivals were reported. On 20 August, the former Yugoslav

Republic of Macedonia declared a '[situation of crisis](#)' at its southern (with Greece) and northern border (with Serbia), and called in its army for support. The situation escalated with violence on the border with Greece, which was temporarily closed due to lack of human resources to register migrants in a timely manner and ensure their transport to the next border. The Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) [reported](#) that by 1 October 2015, only 50 asylum applications had been submitted.

Legal and institutional framework, reception centres

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has progressed in aligning its [legal framework](#) with international standards, but a 2015 UNHCR [analysis](#) noted shortcomings as regards implementation. The [2015 Commission progress report](#) assessed the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as 'moderately prepared' to implement the *acquis* in that area. The Constitution guarantees the right to asylum, which is regulated in the [Law on asylum and temporary protection](#). The law was amended substantially first in 2012 and then [in June 2015](#), as a [temporary solution](#) for dealing with the massive flows of people. As the restrictive rules on asylum-seeking posed a risk of arbitrary detention and push-backs at the border, they were replaced by a procedure allowing people to register their intention to seek asylum at the border. The new procedure protects applicants from the risk of *refoulement* and grants them a 72-hour legal stay in the country, before formally seeking asylum. Migrants receive a document confirming their expressed intention and giving them access to public transport and medical help within 72 hours. In 2015, a working group was established with a mandate to draft a new asylum law, expected to be adopted in 2016.

The Ministry of Interior (Moi) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy [share responsibility](#) as regards asylum procedures. The Section for Asylum and the [Section for Border and Migration](#) (Moi) are the primary government bodies responsible for implementing the reception and asylum procedure. The [Crisis Management Centre](#) coordinates activities on the ground. UNHCR Skopje supports the local authorities, in cooperation with the Commission, Frontex, EASO and civil society organisations such as Legis, MYLA, Help the Refugees, HERA, IOM and La Strada Open Gate, among others.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's 'Vinojug' [reception centre](#) for asylum-seekers is in the town of Gevgelija at the border with Greece. The 'Tabanovce' refugee aid point is at the border with Serbia, and the 'Vizbegovo' reception centre is in Skopje. Reception capacities are being further strengthened under the UNHCR [winterisation plan](#) (November 2015-February 2016). [Project Hope](#) is an ongoing refugee healthcare project. Ongoing EU-funded projects primarily focus on renovating border police stations, fighting against trafficking in human beings and strengthening police capacities for border management.

Other Western Balkan countries

While the other Western Balkan countries are not affected to such an extent, Albania fears that the route may deviate, turning it into another 'refugee hub'. The [route from Albania to Italy](#) had been tested after the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s. Frontex announced that it would [deploy forces](#) to monitor the Greek–Albanian border. Two migrant centres in Gjirokastër and Korçë near Greece are being prepared for such events. An increased, although not yet high, number of refugees have been [reported](#) as crossing Bosnia and Herzegovina to enter Croatia, tracing another potential route.

Reactions to the crisis: EU Member States and the Western Balkans

The migrants challenge has had a significant impact on the Western Balkans. Good neighbourly relations in this region are fragile and latent tensions from past conflicts [easily re-ignited](#). The impact, however, has not been limited to non-EU countries. EU Member States have also been overwhelmed and tensions have built up across Europe, leading governments to resort to individual, '[ad hoc policies](#)'. Despite travel within the Schengen area being unrestricted, some states have [reintroduced internal EU borders](#) and tightened controls even [further](#) in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris. Overall, the EU's reaction has been qualified as 'ad hoc', with a strong [focus on security](#). Divided national interests have hindered a common EU approach.

The transit countries' [divergent responses](#) have strained their bilateral relations. So far, **Hungary's** initial reaction is considered the most drastic. The country recently [amended its asylum legislation](#) to restrict access for refugees, and also opposed compulsory EU quotas for relocation of asylum-seekers. In December 2015, the European Commission opened infringement proceedings against Hungary over a new law which [allegedly prevents failed asylum-seekers from winning appeals to stay](#). Hungary erected fences and closed its borders both with Serbia ([15 September](#)) and Croatia ([16 October](#)), and plans to build another fence on its border with Romania. On 16 September, Hungarian police clashed with refugees at the border crossing at Horgoš and used teargas and water cannon against them while they were on Serbian territory. This led to tensions with Serbia; the border was closed and then reopened five days later. Hungary's relations with Serbia improved but its tensions with **Croatia** [deepened](#). The restricted passage through the border with Serbia redirected the migrant flows to Croatia, which reciprocated by transporting people to Hungary. Hungary sent armed forces to the Croatian border, authorising them to use non-lethal force against migrants. Croatia and **Serbia** got into a [more intense row](#) which [escalated into a 'trade war'](#). Following the high number of arrivals from Serbia, on 20 September Croatia closed the last of its eight crossings with Serbia, halting all cargo traffic. The trade ban lasted several days. Serbia closed its borders to all Croatian goods, and Croatia responded by closing its borders to all passenger traffic from Serbia. Croatia warned it might build fences along its border with Serbia. The Serbian Prime Minister [sent a protest letter](#) to the EU, demanding mediation and adherence to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU. In November 2015, the bilateral crisis subsided and a mutual [commitment](#) for more structured cooperation followed. Both countries [agreed](#) to provide train services across their borders to ease travel through the region.

The border closure between Hungary and Croatia affected **Slovenia** as well. Since mid-October, more than 150 000 people have crossed the country. The government called in the army and private security personnel to boost its small police force. Slovenia mentioned the possibility of invoking a '[never-before-used 'solidarity clause' in the EU treaties](#)' to request EU aid and military support. On 11 November 2015, it [started building a fence](#) along its border with Croatia.

In August 2015, **Germany** [exempted Syrian citizens](#) from the rules of the Dublin Regulation, but [removed the exemption](#) in November. It [reinstated border controls](#) on its border with Austria in September, after receiving hundreds of thousands of migrants in a few days. **Austria** also said it could [build a fence](#) on the border with Slovenia. Border controls have been [introduced](#) by others as well in what is seen as the [greatest blow to Schengen](#) since its inception. Most recently, [additional limitations](#) have been

introduced by four countries on the Balkan route. At the end of November, Slovenia and Croatia closed their borders to 'economic migrants' from countries not affected by war. This triggered a similar response by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, which now only allow migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq; the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has started building a fence along its border with Greece. The resulting tensions and the thousands of [stranded](#) people at the border have been a clear signal that cooperation with the Western Balkans is crucial.

European Union response: implications for the Western Balkans

The refugee crisis, which has led Member States to reintroduce [border controls](#) and erect fences, and has been [considered a threat](#) to the Schengen area of free movement, has been qualified as one of the [greatest challenges](#) the EU has ever faced. It has significant implications for the entire EU, straining Member States financially, and putting both their ability to cooperate with each other and the common EU values to the test. It may have a potentially disruptive impact on EU politics, especially when in the aftermath of the [Paris attacks](#) and New Year's Eve [assaults in Cologne](#) refugees have increasingly been regarded as a risk to security. The EU's [ongoing](#) search for a tailored response to migration intensified significantly in 2015, when migration was at the centre of a series of high-level meetings and conferences (see Figure 2). The EU institutions took a number of internal measures to assist Member States most affected by the refugee influx due to their geographical position (Greece and Italy, in particular) and to look for a more efficient way to address this challenge in a coordinated manner, with shared efforts.

The refugee crisis also brought to the fore the realisation that the EU cannot act alone. Arriving via Turkey, migrants first enter the EU, then cross into non-EU countries and re-enter the EU again to reach the Schengen area. Therefore, in seeking solutions, the EU has attached high priority to working with these third countries. It has recently stepped up efforts for better cooperation with its neighbours involved in the crisis, especially Turkey and the Western Balkan countries. In a [key debate](#) during Parliament's October plenary session, concerns were raised that the present situation, apart from undermining the EU, might turn into a geopolitical crisis with a destabilising effect on the Western Balkans whose capacities to respond have been exceeded. The debate concluded that tighter cooperation with the Western Balkans was necessary to prevent further crisis in the region.

Cooperation with third countries

In the short-term, the focus has been on taking measures to stem the migrant influx to the EU, secure the borders with third countries, better manage arrivals and ensure timely and efficient information exchange. The EU has agreed on providing financial support for all of the above.

Slowing down the migrant flow

Host to a large number of migrants, as well as being the country from which most migrants reach the EU borders and the Western Balkans, Turkey stands out as a crucial

Figure 2: Timeline



partner to curb further influx. In October 2015, the European Council endorsed a [joint action plan](#) with Turkey, and at the 29 November 2015 [summit](#), an initial €3 billion was committed to help improve the situation of Syrian refugees. Both parties agreed to fully apply the EU-Turkey readmission agreement from June 2016, and to complete the visa liberalisation process for Turkish citizens in the Schengen area by October 2016. Turkey promised to impose stronger visa requirements and residence rules for certain migrants and return those not eligible for international protection to their countries of origin.

To address the issue of migrants from the Western Balkans (together with Turkey, nationals of these countries account for a big share in the total number of applications lodged in the EU), in September 2015, the Commission proposed [a regulation](#) to set up a common EU list of [safe countries of origin](#) including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey.

The Western Balkan countries were added to the 'safe countries of origin' list, as in principle they are considered to fulfil the requirements of the [Asylum Procedures Directive](#) and the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership. The European Council for Refugees and Exiles ([ECRE](#)) considers, however, that their proposed inclusion is not properly justified and [recommends](#) that the safety criteria be assessed in consultation with a range of sources, including EASO, UNHCR, the Council of Europe and other relevant organisations. If the proposal is to be adopted, the [Meijers Committee](#) (an independent expert group that does research, inter alia, on migration issues) [recommends](#) that Parliament, before voting on the proposal, seek expert advice on whether these countries meet the designation criteria or not.

Better management of arrivals

Although arrivals could be slowed down, they cannot be stopped completely. To prevent the Western Balkans from becoming a '[parking lot](#)' for refugees and address the challenges along the eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route, the EU organised two dedicated meetings: a [high-level conference on the Western Balkans](#) on 8 October, followed by a [Balkan 'mini summit'](#) on 25 October 2015. At the conference, representatives from the Western Balkans, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon acknowledged that they face a common challenge, concluding that 'collective responsibility must be translated into collective action'. They adopted a [declaration](#) that foresees a series of practical steps for more effective cooperation. Special attention was paid to the vulnerable position of the Western Balkans, in particular Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as the most affected transit countries. Among the key actions agreed was to provide support for the region to enhance reception and accommodation facilities along the route, strengthen local capacity to register and process asylum applications, and facilitate regional cooperation and information exchange.

During the Balkan mini-summit of 25 October, the leaders of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, as well as Albania, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia met, together with the Presidents of the Commission and the European Council, the Council presidency-in-office and its successor, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and representatives of EASO and Frontex. They agreed on a [17-point plan](#), outlining a set of operational measures. Countries along the route agreed to nominate national contact points to coordinate the permanent exchange of information and thus allow for 'gradual, controlled and orderly movement' of people along the route. The Commission and the national contact points are to jointly monitor the implementation via video conferences on a weekly basis. The states were asked to discourage further movement of refugees

to the borders of a neighbouring country without prior notification, as well as to trigger the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (see box) where necessary. Both Greece and the Western Balkans committed to increasing their reception capacities by 50 000 places each by the end of 2015.

In May 2015, the **European Commission** adopted a [four-pillar European Agenda on Migration](#), which, among other things, introduced the 'hotspot' concept. The 'hotspot' is conceived as a platform and a flexible tool allowing agencies like EASO, Frontex and the EU's law enforcement agency, [Europol](#), to intervene rapidly and in an integrated manner, in frontline Member States (Greece and Italy at present). They would provide operational support to national authorities for swift identification, registration and fingerprinting of arriving migrants. At the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 9 November 2015, the EU announced

its plans for a similar approach, to better pool efforts and avoid duplication of work, in the Western Balkans. The '[processing centres](#)', likely to be set up in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, are to receive migrants and initiate asylum applications or the return mechanism. In its [Conclusions](#), the JHA Council also noted that the first European migration liaison officers, provided for in the Agenda on Migration, should be deployed as a priority in several third countries, including in Serbia, by the end of January 2016. The aim is to assist local authorities with gathering, exchanging and analysing information.

Securing external borders

Another area of short-term actions to address urgent needs is securing the external borders of the EU, which again involves reinforced cooperation with Turkey and the Western Balkans as immediate neighbours. The above-mentioned 17-point plan includes several points on strengthening border management: scaling up the Poseidon Joint Sea Operation in Greece; reinforcing Frontex support at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey; managing the external land borders of Greece with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania; monitoring the Croatian-Serbian border crossing points; deploying 400 police officers in Slovenia; and making use of Rapid Border Intervention Teams ([RABIT](#)). In line with this, in December 2015, Greece [agreed on a new Frontex operation](#) at the border with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and started [removing stranded migrants](#) from that border.

The [Civil Protection Mechanism](#) can be activated by any Member State facing a crisis. Coordinated by the Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre, it can mobilise various types of assistance (teams, equipment, medical supplies). It facilitates cooperation in emergency response among 33 countries (EU-28, Iceland, Norway, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). Turkey has recently signed the agreement, too. As regards the refugee crisis, it has [been activated](#) by Hungary and Serbia (September 2015), Slovenia and Croatia (October 2015) and [Greece](#) (December 2015).

In its September 2015 [Resolution](#) on migration and refugees, the **European Parliament** welcomed the hotspot approach and expressed support for the Commission's initiative to set up a binding relocation mechanism. The EP backed a move to amend the Dublin Regulation and to ensure the safe and legal arrival of refugees via humanitarian corridors and visas. The EP stressed the need for solidarity, a comprehensive EU approach, coherent internal and external policies, as well as for holding an international conference on refugees with the relevant UN agencies and NGOs, the United States and the Arab states, to forge a common global humanitarian aid strategy. In an October [resolution](#), the EP supported the Commission's proposal to make changes to the EU budget for 2015 to ensure the proper management of the refugee crisis. In November 2015, the EP [debated](#) in plenary the outcomes of the Valetta Summit on migration.

The implementation of the measures taken so far was [assessed](#) during a 12 November [informal meeting](#) of Heads of State or Government held after the [Valletta Summit](#) on migration, and during the 16 November [Foreign Affairs Council](#). The main focus was on Turkey; the Western Balkan countries were described as EU 'allies' in the process of handling the situation. Migration was again a [key agenda point](#) at the European Council of 18-19 December 2015, with President Donald Tusk underlining the 'delivery deficit' in respect of the agreed measures.

Financial assistance

To back the above measures, the EU has committed to providing [financial and technical support](#) to the candidate and potential candidate countries from the Western Balkans, so far mainly through the [Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance](#) (IPA) and its 2014 successor, [IPA II](#), but recently also through additional funds. Made or planned investments in migration-related activities (see box) have been dedicated to projects for introducing integrated border management, upgrading reception centres, reforming national asylum systems, strengthening institutions for achieving effective migration management and countering the traffic of human beings. The need to provide for the thousands of refugees going across the region has been far greater than local resources and management capacities can handle, revealing how urgently further immediate assistance is needed for coping with the situation. Ahead of the High-Level Conference on the Western Balkans route, in October 2015 the EU approved an [additional €17 million](#) to assist the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia in particular. November 2015 marked the start of a multi-country IPA II programme, 'Regional support to protection-sensitive migration management in the Western Balkans and Turkey', with a three-year implementation period and a budget of €8 million. It aims to facilitate migrant identification, improve information exchange and lay the groundwork for sustainable return solutions. The Commission will implement it through Frontex, IOM and UNHCR.

[Overall pre-accession support](#) for migration-related activities (both past and planned) since 2007

Albania	€4.5 million
Bosnia and Herzegovina	€16.8 million
former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	€24 million
Kosovo	€7.1 million
Montenegro	€22.6 million
Serbia	€54 million

A [leading donor](#) for alleviating the Syria crisis, the EU has also allocated €1.74 million in [humanitarian aid](#) to Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia alone. Some €1.5 million of this amount will be used for providing basic emergency services in winter (drinking water, hygiene, healthcare, shelter, improvement of reception centres, and coordination and reporting on migration issues in the region). An additional €240 000 (€90 000 for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and €150 000 for Serbia) has been allocated via the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

Outlook

The refugee crisis has been at the heart of the EU debate for several months and the measures taken so far have not been seen as [matching its scale](#). In its [Autumn 2015 economic forecast](#), the Commission points out that around 3 million persons may arrive in the EU in the period between 2015 and 2017. As the migration flow is [not likely to abate](#) in the near future, a reform of EU asylum policies may become ['the next major European project'](#). The current situation raises [concerns](#) about its potential impact on

national politics, public attitudes, divisions within the EU and its overall credibility. The Western Balkans remain at the centre of [possible scenarios](#) for the coming months. A wide range of factors may help shape the future: increased immigration and border control or further restrictions by destination countries, deterioration in Syria or in host third countries, reduced international funding, among other things, may boost migrant numbers and/or leave migrants stuck in transit countries. Conversely, increased humanitarian assistance, prospects for improvement in Syria, effective legal ways to reach Europe or relocate migrants, would lead to a decrease in or containment of the number of migrants crossing the transit countries.

At present, the focus is on short-term operational measures. To manage migration more effectively, the Commission has presented proposals for establishing a European Border and Coast Guard (as part of the December 2015 ['Borders Package'](#)), a [permanent relocation mechanism](#), and will soon present proposals for reform of the Dublin Regulation, among others. The external dimension of the EU agenda includes addressing the long-term consequences for sending and transit countries as well and finding ways to work more closely with the Western Balkans by drafting a common approach to the crisis in future.

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Endnote

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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