



MIGRATION CRISIS: SWITZERLAND'S ACTIVITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

2016

Key figures

737,489

Migrants took the Balkans route in 2015 (Greece, Macedonia, Serbia to Western Europe).

32%

of registered migrants who had crossed the Greek-Macedonian border by the end of November 2015 were children.

CHF 1.5 million

has been provided by Switzerland to support the activities of the Serbian and Macedonian governments, international organisations (UNHCR, IOM) and local NGOs.

Core activities that have received Swiss financial support:

- › Emergency aid measures, such as distributing food, clothing and medical supplies (UNHCR, NGOs)
- › Legal counselling, psychosocial assistance, protection measures and information (especially NGOs)
- › Strengthening border management (governments and IOM)
- › Setting up an early warning system (IOM)
- › Mapping the movements of human traffickers and smugglers (IOM)
- › Provision of winter-resistant infrastructure in reception centres (UNHCR)

Further information

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According to UNHCR, in 2015 more than 700,000 people arrived in Western Europe via the Western Balkans route – mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Switzerland is supporting the activities of UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and those of NGOs in Serbia and Macedonia during the current migration crisis within the framework of the Migration Partnerships. The support amounts to CHF 1.5 million. Consequently, Switzerland was able to help to improve migration management and to efficiently provide emergency materials and psychosocial support for the migrants at very short notice.



The migrants are registered in the transit centre of Presevo (Serbia). © SDC/IOM

While in 2014 the main migratory movements were mostly from North Africa via the central Mediterranean to Italy, in spring 2015 the migrants' route changed radically, and most now travel from Turkey via Greece and the Western Balkans to Western Europe. Owing to the very large number of migrants, major demands are now being placed on Macedonia and Serbia, which together with Slovenia and Croatia are transit countries along the Balkans Route.

Enormous challenges for all actors involved

According to UNHCR, in 2015 more than 700,000 officially registered migrants took the route from Greece to Macedonia and on to Serbia, among them many families with children as well as minors travelling alone. The proportion of children among the migrants has increased continually to reach 32% by November 2015. The tasks of registering and providing for the migrants' needs has been made more difficult by the large fluctuations in migrant arrivals, which were difficult to predict, as well as the routes they took.

As a result, on 20 August 2015 the Macedonian government declared a state of emergency after temporarily losing control over the inflow of migrants in Gevgelija on the Greek-Macedonian border. In February 2016, Macedonia introduced tougher conditions for entry and since then has been allowing only Syrian and Iraqi refugees to travel through its territory.

The Serbian government for its part is making enormous efforts to provide the migrants with basic services. Reception centres have been opened to facilitate the registration process and security controls have been improved. Tighter border controls for entering Slovenia and Croatia, especially towards the end of 2015, caused many migrants to be trapped on the Balkans route

As the countries of the Western Balkans face insufficient capacities to meet the requirements of such a significant migration movement, they have had to rely on international assistance right from the beginning of the crisis. In 2015, both UNHCR and IOM launched various appeals for emergency aid funds.

Supporting migration management

Switzerland responded to the appeal launched by UNHCR in June 2015 ('Special Mediterranean Initiative') and provided funds for UNHCR's activities in Serbia and Macedonia. UNHCR helps governments to plan appropriate responses to the crisis and advises them on bringing their asylum systems in line with international standards. In addition, it coordinates emergency aid through local helpers, who provide the migrants with adequate food, clothing and hygiene items.

Switzerland is also funding -activities of IOM in addition to those of UNHCR. IOM is working closely with governmental partners in Serbia to improve migration and border management and make the registration process more efficient. For example, IOM is assisting the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration to equip transit and reception centres. In addition, it is helping the border police to increase its capacity to respond, providing supplementary equipment for its work, such as vehicles for border patrols, mobile teams, manuals, etc. Furthermore, five mobile teams – comprising social workers, translators and medical personnel – are working together in Serbia with the border police to identify people who could fall victim to human smuggling or trafficking.

Switzerland has also funded the installation of a regional early-warning system to help assess future migration flows and better plan the operations at the borders and in transit centres. With the tighter border controls there has been an increase in illegal activities, which has prompted IOM to map human smuggling and trafficking operations in the region to obtain information for determining future measures. Switzerland has provided IOM with financial support for its efforts.

Links

IOM: Overview of migration flows
<http://migration.iom.int/europe/>

Complementary humanitarian and psychosocial aid

NGOs are providing complementary support to the activities of national governments and international organisations, offering legal advice and informing migrants about the dangers of human trafficking. Switzerland is therefore working with various Serbian and Macedonian NGOs active in this area.

The Serbian NGO Atina is helping (refugee) victims of human trafficking and is providing them with a 'safe house' in Belgrade, as well as with psychosocial assistance and legal support. Since June 2015, the mobile NGO teams assisted 5000 refugees on average a week and referred them to appropriate support services. Other Serbian NGOs, such as 'Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation' (EHO) and Mikser, focus on emergency aid measures, in particular for vulnerable population groups, as well as on providing medical and psychological assistance. Mikser specialises in caring for children. EHO is carrying out additional media campaigns, appealing to the public for more tolerance towards the migrants.

The Macedonian NGO 'SOS Children's Villages' is devoting its attention to the many mothers travelling through the country with small children, providing these families at the border towns of Tabanovce and Gevgelija with baby food, hygiene articles, protection against rain, and attending to their other needs. It is also reuniting family members using a means of communication adapted for this purpose. The NGO 'La Strada' is running various information campaigns to combat xenophobia in the public and providing refugees with winter clothing.

Moreover, in November 2015, the SDC's Humanitarian Aid supported local civil defence organisations and NGOs in Slovenia and Croatia with aid supplies and expertise to ensure that the infrastructure in the transit centres was capable of withstanding winter conditions.

