

Press Release

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EASO publishes report on asylum flows from the Western Balkans

EASO has today published a comparative analysis of trends, push-pull factors and responses to the flow of asylum-seekers from Western Balkan countries to EU Member States and Associated Countries, which has consistently represented the largest proportion of asylum-seekers dealt with in the EU in recent years. This analysis provides decision - and policy-makers - with tools for understanding and better managing situations in which they are confronted with large numbers of applications for international protection from Western Balkans citizens and other flows with similar characteristics. It also attempts to identify the measures which have proved to be the most effective in reducing the impact of some of the pull factors and in processing large numbers of applications for international protection where many may be unfounded, while ensuring full consideration of each individual claim and ensuring protection for those who need it.

In recent years, applications for asylum made by citizens of the Western Balkans (WB) countries¹ (when considered together) have consistently represented the highest numbers of asylum requests made in the EU (exceeding the numbers from any other country of origin). This is despite the fact that applications from Western Balkans citizens are largely considered to be unfounded by Member States and Associated Countries (MSAC) - as shown by a rejection rate of 96% in 2012. The EASO report aims to provide the first accurate and comprehensive overview of the flow of asylum seekers from the Western Balkans and Member States' reaction to it. EASO's latest publication:

1. Accurately describes the main characteristics of the recent flow of WB citizens applying for international protection in Member States and Associated Countries - who, from where, to where, over which period of time
2. Examines the principal factors determining decisions by Western Balkans citizens to leave their country and apply for asylum in the EU (push factors)
3. Examines the factors which affect their choice of destination country (pull factors)
4. Looks at measures put in place by the MSAC most concerned and by WB authorities to address these push and pull factors, and efficiently process applications from WB citizens

The report highlights that the WB flow is limited to a small number of MSAC and in some cases greatly affects their asylum systems' ability to process other claims. The number of applications is variable over time (while showing a general upward trend) and strongly seasonal (increasingly so in recent years), with the major peaks being seen just before winter. Asylum seekers from Western Balkans

¹ Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia

consist mainly of Roma from Serbia and FYROM, and Albanians from Albania and Kosovo. Though Western Balkans citizens face one of the highest rejection rates of asylum claims of any countries of origin, the rate varies by destination country and by country of origin, with Albania seeing the highest number of positive decisions and FYROM the lowest overall.

The most important **push factors** behind the decision of some WB citizens to claim asylum in MSAC are considered to be the societal problems of specific groups, which are closely linked – especially in the case of Roma – to unemployment and poverty. In turn, problems accessing the labour market has led many to rely on social infrastructure and services (including welfare benefits) that are insufficient – thus constituting a third push factor. Finally, it should be noted that also insufficient and poorly accessible health care constitutes a push factor for a small but significant number of applicants.

The principal **pull factors** determining the choice of destination country are mainly economic in nature. MSAC experts see the linked issues of (particularly cash) benefits provided during the asylum procedure and the related issue of long processing times as the main factors determining both the decision of WB citizens to apply for asylum and where they apply for asylum. The presence of an existing diaspora is likely to be a strong factor given the almost perfect correlation between the stock of residence permits and the list of MSAC most affected by the WB flow. The possibilities to find legal or illegal work may also be important depending on the profile of the applicants. Tangible benefits other than cash, such as health care may be particularly important as pull factors for certain individual profiles of applicant.

A catalogue of measures has been taken by MSAC to reduce both push and pull factors. The report stresses that a package of measures, which must include at minimum very short procedures for manifestly unfounded applications (while allowing the possibility of normal procedures where cases have any merit) and reduced cash benefits appears to be the most effective contribution to reducing numbers of largely unfounded applications.

The report makes use of EUROSTAT statistics and is based on an analyses of replies to detailed questionnaires provided by experts involved in various aspects of dealing with the phenomenon both in the region and in the destination countries. It is also based on the results of a Practical Cooperation meeting hosted by EASO in March 2013. Desk research and a study visit to selected Western Balkan countries have further complemented the analysis and allowed EASO to illustrate the broader context in which pull and push factors should be interpreted.

The report can be accessed via the following link: <http://easo.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/EASO-Report-Western-Balkans.pdf>

Any further information may be obtained from the European Asylum Support Office by contacting Mr Jean-Pierre Schembri on the following e-mail address: jean-pierre.schembri@easo.europa.eu