



## Management Summary: Decision Making on the Balkan Route and the EU-Turkey Statement

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In 2015, there were higher than normal migration flows from Turkey to Greece and then via the Western Balkans to other European Union (EU) countries, leading to what has been termed Europe's 'refugee crisis'. In November 2015, a Joint Action Plan (JAP) was developed between the EU and Turkey to 'stop the crisis'. The result of the JAP was the implementation of the EU Turkey Statement, popularly known as the EU Turkey Deal, on 20 March 2016. The EU Turkey Statement has been a contentious policy that has created significant debate amongst actors within the EU. The objective of this report is to examine how the package of policies associated with the Statement influenced refugees and migrants' decision-making in Turkey and on the Western Balkans route to Europe between 2015 and 2018.

The primary research question guiding this study is:  
*How can the fluctuations in migration flows on the Balkans route from January 2015-December 2018 be explained?*

The core sub-questions guiding this research are:

- What explanations are there for the sharp decrease in the number of refugees and migrants on the Balkans route even before the EU-Turkey Statement came into effect?

- What are the decision making factors of refugees and migrants when choosing to leave Turkey before and after the EU-Turkey Statement?
- To what extent do policy interventions impact refugees and migrants' decision-making regarding routes and destination choices?

The EU Turkey Statement is considered in this report as inclusive of policy changes that occurred after the signing of JAP, therefore addressing the time period from November 2015 to post implementation of the EU Turkey Statement in March 2016. The reason for this is that the result of the JAP was the EU Turkey Statement itself and together these policies aimed to 'stop the crisis'. Immediate policy changes after the JAP included the government of Turkey leading raids of beaches, factories making life jackets and dinghies, and new visa requirements for Iraqis and Syrians entering Turkey.

The model used in this study to assess decision making recognizes that migrant decision making is influenced by a complex array of factors, and policies are one element within the larger complexity of decision making. Second, decision

making is based on perceptions and information processing and consumption. Refugees and migrants' perceptions of any given policy or situation may then be factual, somewhat factual or completely misguided. This is of central importance when considering decision making, as decisions are taken based on these perceptions, which may in fact not reflect either the policy's actual intentions or implementation. This is a difficult issue to reconcile in research and policy formation and we have done our best to disentangle this wherever possible within the report. Third, policies are not all equal and different elements of policies such as internal or external control policies, or migration-specific versus migration-relevant policies can have different influences on migration decision making. This report aims to un-pack the different components of the EU-Turkey Statement in order to explore how each part may or may not have influenced refugee and migrant decision making. Our analysis is restricted to focusing on the migration-specific policies in the current country and by destination countries (here focusing primarily on the EU as a regional actor). Migration-specific policy aims to influence migration processes and the position of migrants, for example through stricter physical border controls or through selective access to the labour market. We recognize that other policies may have an impact on decision making, however, given the vast expanse of migration-specific policies introduced in the 2015-2018 time period in Turkey and elsewhere, we do not have scope within this study to go beyond these policies and the EU-Turkey statement. Four, decision making in this study either reflects a previous decision that has been implemented when a respondent has already moved, or reflects a plan at the time of interview to move or stay. The migration decision reflected at the time of interview does not mean that the migration was realized. This is unknown within this study as interviews were only conducted at one moment in time.

The methodology for this study includes a literature review, construction of a timeline of events from 2015-2018, and original interviews with 38 key stakeholders and 96 Afghan and Syrian respondents across the four countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina (32), the Netherlands (32), Serbia (27), Turkey (41). These four countries have been chosen for their different functions in the migration process. Turkey as a country in which millions of migrants and refugees reside and is a starting country for a further journey to Europe, Serbia as a strategic transit country in 2015, Bosnia and Herzegovina as a new transit country in 2017 and 2018, and the Netherlands as a destination country. Although a fair number of interviews have been conducted, the sample of refugees and migrants included in the study is quite small in comparison to the population of these groups, particularly in Turkey. Selective sampling was therefore used in Turkey to gather a diversity of cases and responses and thus cannot be viewed as representative of the overall population in Turkey. Further large-scale survey research would be required to give a more accurate picture of overall migrant intentions in Turkey.

### **What explanations are there for the sharp decrease in the number of refugees and migrants on the Balkans route even before the EU-Turkey Statement came into effect?**

The timeline reconstruction of this study shows that the stricter (physical) border surveillance in countries such as Macedonia, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Austria prior to the EU-Turkey statement was responsible for the decrease in the number of refugees and migrants.

### **What are the decision making factors of refugees and migrants when choosing to leave Turkey before and after the EU Turkey Statement?**

The core objective of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey was to improve conditions for refugees. In many ways, this has been achieved as initiatives such as the ESSN card are a vital source of day-to-day support for nearly one third of refugees in Turkey. At the same time, however, conditions for refugees in Turkey have not significantly changed. In this study, we find the same results as previous research from prior to the implementation of the EU Turkey Statement (Duvell, 2018; Koser & Kuschminder, 2016) that refugees and migrants want to leave Turkey due to poor conditions. This includes inadequate living conditions; for those that receive the ESSN, despite this vital cash transfer it is not enough to live beyond an absolute bare minimum. Legal status is insecure creating "permanent temporariness". Over a third of Syrian children are still not in school and only Afghan children with international protection status, which the majority do not hold, have the opportunity to attend school. The only employment opportunities are informal and in low-skilled factory work where refugees report degrading treatment. The list continues. In line with previous research, this study finds that conditions in Turkey are the most influential factor that influence the onwards migration decision.

A second important factor in refugees and migrants' decision making that was not reported as frequently in 2015 research, is that the onwards migration decision making is made to join family members that arrived in Europe (frequently in 2015). Due to the high flows in 2015, several European countries imposed restrictions on family reunification, including the temporary suspension of family reunification rights for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, making it difficult or impossible for family members to join those who had already arrived. In this research 13 individuals in transit in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were seeking to join their family members. This is an important consideration of an unintended policy implication.

An important new development from previous research is that in contrast to earlier research that suggested those who had sought to move on from Turkey did so in 2015 (Duvell, 2018), we find that since early 2016 there is an increasing population of 'stuck' refugees and migrants in Turkey. Two central factors that contribute to being stuck are; first, the rise in cost of smugglers due to increased external migration

controls and deterrence. Second, the inability to pay such fees due to rising economic challenges in Turkey, competitiveness for informal jobs, and inflation increasing daily living costs. Thus, although the aspiration to migrate onwards still appears high (19 of 30 respondents in Turkey), the capabilities to do so are restricted by increased smuggling costs and external control policies to deter movements.

#### **To what extent do policy interventions – specifically the EU Turkey Statement- impact refugees and migrants’ decision-making regarding routes and destination choices?**

The implementation of the EU Turkey statement on 20 March 2016 led to two important considerations for refugees and migrants in Turkey. First, after a short period of time it became clear that newly arrived refugees and migrants in Greece were stuck on the islands and this information filtered back to those still in Turkey. Going by sea to Greece was thus not only a more difficult option, but it was widely perceived that conditions on the islands were significantly poorer compared to 2015. This has been reflected in changing flows which have seen an increased in detections on Turkey’s land borders in 2018.

Second, the Facility for Refugees in Turkey has had different impacts on different nationality groups. In this study, this is quite clear in that 10 of the 19 Syrians interviewed in Turkey wanted to move onwards from Turkey compared to nine of the eleven Afghan interviewees in Turkey (19 of 30 total respondents aspire to move onwards). The sample size of respondents in this study is relatively small, so clearly this interpretation needs to be taken with caution. However, the Facility for Refugees has created a two-tier system in Turkey for Syrian and non-Syrian refugees. This was reflected strongly in the interviews with Afghans who understood that they were not given the same rights and services as Syrians, but commonly did not understand why.

#### **Overarching Conclusions and Implications**

Migrant decision making is multi-faceted and policies can only have a limited effect. In this report we focus on specific policies and their role in decision making, recognising that decision making is complex and influenced by multiple factors (as shown in the conceptual model outlined in Section 3 and explained further). Consistent with earlier research, this study found that the most significant factors for refugees and migrants’ decisions regarding onwards movement from Turkey continue to be: employment, legal rights, quality of life, and family reunification. All of these elements are highly influenced by the policy environment; but individual policies may have uneven impacts on the lived experience of different refugees and migrants and may carry varying weight in their individual decision making processes.

Regarding the role of the EU-Turkey Statement within these decision making processes, the Statement included policies to both strengthen support for refugees in Turkey, and to control irregular migration through the one-for-one arrangement and external migration control policies. The EU-Turkey Statement did not have an explicit role in respondents’ decision making, as few knew of the deal, and those who demonstrated some knowledge of it often gave information which diverged considerably from the Statement’s stated policy intentions. At the same time, however, the EU-Turkey Statement clearly did have significant effects on decision making through its implementation of external controls which have further constrained refugees and migrants’ capabilities for onwards migration. This connection was not always clear to refugees and migrants, which reflects the important policy information gap discussed in Section 4 of this report. On the whole, refugees and migrants were highly aware that the route, through the Western Balkans, was now closed and much more difficult.

The results of the research lead to three overarching conclusions and implications.

1. It is clear that the EU-Turkey Statement has had clear and notable impacts. It is undeniable that flows have decreased from the EU-Turkey Statement, considering the policy changes that began in November 2015 in Turkey with the JAP and continued until post implementation in Greece in 2016. It is uncertain, however, if this is a temporary or long-term shift. At the time of writing in 2019, arrivals from Turkey to Greece have been increasing (although clearly not to the same scale as in 2015), and, as this research clearly shows, aspirations to move onwards from Turkey are still high.

Although not the central focus of this report, there is also sufficient evidence to conclude that the EU-Turkey Statement has impacted smuggling dynamics in Turkey. This is demonstrated by: 1) the more diverse smuggling routes and prices reported by respondents as compared to the cost of the standard sea crossing to Greece in 2015, 2) the smuggling market’s shift from visibility to be clandestine, and 3) by the high number of failed onwards migration attempts. It is not possible to assess, based on this research, how the EU-Turkey Statement has impacted the business model of smugglers, and further research would therefore be necessary to understand the ways that recruitment, profits, and smuggling approaches have changed.

2. The Facility for Refugees in Turkey, although an immense investment of the EU, has not greatly changed decision making among many refugees and migrants in Turkey. The central reason for this is that economic conditions in Turkey are deteriorating at a faster rate than the Facility can correct through its policies and investments. Resultantly, a policy intended to reduce vulnerability and improve conditions for refugees in Turkey is encapsulated within a system of structural insecurity and rising vulnerabilities.

A core element of the Facility is the ESSN that provides important cash assistance for the most vulnerable registered refugees (therefore excluding unregistered Afghans). A recent assessment of the ESSN by the World Food Programme (WFP), with primarily Syrian and Iraqi refugees, found that the ESSN helps to lift beneficiary households' income above the threshold of the Minimum Expenditure Basket, thus reducing their poverty levels. However, the WFP assessment also found that ESSN beneficiaries remain poorer overall than refugees deemed ineligible for the ESSN or who have not applied for the ESSN. This demonstrates that amongst Syrian and Iraqi refugees, beneficiaries of the ESSN are the poorest. While this cash assistance is urgently needed by beneficiaries for their day-to-day survival, the impact of these cash transfers on individual lives is still relatively small. It is therefore unsurprising that the evidence from respondents demonstrates that neither receiving the ESSN nor the prospect of receiving the ESSN influences decision making to stay in Turkey rather than move onwards.

In terms of the Facility's major investments in education and health, the Facility has made large investments into health and education, but refugees and migrants continue to be frustrated by the difficulties in accessing both health and education in Turkey (and in some cases by the quality of the services offered). Despite investments of the Facility into both health and education, health and education are both still cited as a driver of aspirations to leave Turkey.

The Facility has not been able to address wider issues such as refugees and migrants' legal rights and opportunities for integration into the formal labour market in Turkey. Access to Temporary and International Protection status in Turkey is increasingly restricted, and the legal rights and security that these statuses confer often fall short of respondents' expectations. It is clear that employment is a central factor driving aspirations for onwards movement, and the evidence suggests that formal employment that offers decent working conditions and wages is a factor that could potentially change decision making to stay in Turkey. Recognising that the Facility has not been able to substantially increase formal employment, this is an important area for policy consideration.

On the whole, the Facility for Refugees in Turkey is clearly an indispensable component of humanitarian aid in Turkey that protects beneficiaries against the worst immediate effects of forced displacement (for example, in terms of poverty, missed schooling and health risks). However, given respondents' strong desires for longer-term security and better socio-economic prospects, current Facility programming has not played a central role in the decision making of refugees and migrants in this study. Further research would be needed to expand the understanding of the Facility's role in refugee livelihoods and decision making in Turkey.

3. The current context – more than three years on from the initial implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement – has important differentiating elements from 2015. In 2015, it was thought that those who wanted to move onwards from Turkey were on their way or had already left Turkey. Today, the situation is different with an increasing population of refugees and migrants 'stuck' in Turkey and experiencing 'involuntary immobility'. Aspirations for onwards mobility appear to still be high amongst the respondents interviewed, with 19 of the 30 respondents interviewed in Turkey aspiring to move onwards (and for many of the same reasons that motivated onwards movement prior to the EU-Turkey Statement). In particular, Afghans, most of whom do not have access to international protection or any other legal status in Turkey, aspire to move onwards. As mentioned, although aspirations for migration are still high, capabilities for onwards movement are greatly reduced, and it is unclear how many respondents will be able to actually realise their migration aspirations. The implications of having a 'stuck' population in Turkey - particularly in light of the shrinking access to international protection offered in Turkey - requires further reflection and consideration.