



Afghan Exodus: Afghan asylum seekers in Europe (1) – the changing situation

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In 2016, Afghans remained the second-largest group both of migrants seeking protection in Europe and of those formally applying for asylum. Meanwhile, numbers of arrivals – both in general and in terms of Afghans – have dropped significantly, compared with the peak in late 2015, as European countries have since made getting, staying and integrating there more complicated. Numbers of asylum applications widely differed between European countries. Furthermore, the EU and individual member states put agreements in place with the Afghan government that allow “voluntary” and “enforced” returns of larger numbers of rejected asylum seekers. In this first part of a three-part dispatch, AAN’s co-director Thomas Ruttig looks at the latest figures and trends as well as changes in policy and social climate that impacted the situation for Afghan asylum seekers in Europe. This will be followed by an overview of the situation in a number of individual European countries (part 2) and a case study on Germany, the largest recipient country in Europe for refugees (part 3). The last part will also draw some conclusions.



Unless stated otherwise, all statistical data on the EU in this dispatch is from Eurostat (see [here](#) and [here](#)), in order to maintain compatibility. The term “asylum applicant” refers to first-time applicant. Applicants have the right to file a follow-up application if personal circumstances relevant to their claim have changed which leads to a higher number of overall applications.

No full set of data on Afghan migrants for all European countries is available in the Eurostat statistics. For individual member states, only the top 3 or 5 countries of origin are published, leaving out Afghans, for example, in the Netherlands, the UK or Italy in some or all quarters of 2016.

The following colleagues provided detail, mainly about their home countries: Kaisa Pylkkanen (Finland), Fabrizio Foschini (Italy) and the Guardian’s Sune Engel Rasmussen (Denmark); AAN colleagues Martine van Bijlert (Netherlands), Kate Clark (UK), Jelena Bjelica (Serbia, Romania, Croatia and Hungary) as well as Ann Wilkens from the AAN advisory board (Sweden).

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Overall figures

The overall number of arriving migrants in Europe has dropped sharply in 2016. Arrivals from non-European countries of origin to Europe – ie the 28 EU member-countries (including brexiting UK) plus the four non-members (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein) – decreased from the 1,015,000 in the peak year of 2015 to close to over 362,000 in 2016, ie by two thirds. (These UNHCR figures – see a daily update [here](#) – only count those arriving across the Mediterranean, which is by far the most important entry route. There are no statistics about other routes where much smaller numbers of migrants can be assumed, for example through Russia.)

Of these first time applicants from all countries of origin, Germany registered just under 63 per cent, almost the same percentage as in 2015 (more detail in part 3). It was followed by Sweden (11.8 per cent), Italy (8.8 per cent) and France (5.2 per cent). Austria, Greece and the UK each had above 3 per cent; Hungary over 2 per cent; Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain each over 1 per cent. Everyone else was under 1 per cent, with Estonia and Slovakia (both 0.01 per cent) at the absolute bottom.

In the first three quarters of 2016, Germany also always had the highest rate of asylum seekers per capita of the population (2,155; 2,273; 2,945). With one exception (Austria in the first quarter) this was more than double than all runner-up countries with the next highest rates (Austria, Malta and Luxemburg; Hungary, Austria and Greece; Malta, Greece and Austria). This had still been different in 2015 when, amidst the highest absolute number of incoming migrants, it registered only a comparatively low percentage of them as asylum applicants. Then, Germany



ranked fifth only in Europe – although per capita rates were far higher. Germany had 5,441, trailing Hungary (17,699), Sweden (16,016), Austria (9,970) and Finland (5,876).

The overall number of people applying for asylum or other forms of protection in Europe, after dropping by one third between the last quarter of the peak year of 2015 (with 426,000 applicants) and the first quarter of 2016 (less than 290,000), again started to rise in 2016. A total of over 951,000 was reached by the end of the third quarter according to the most recent published EU data (full 2016 figures are expected in March 2017). If the trend continues, the 2015 level of 1.26 million applicants (more than double 2014) might be reached again.

Incoming but still incomplete national data for the full 2016 year reviewed by the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) (see [here](#)) indicated contradictory trends among European countries: While an increase in asylum applications compared to 2015 was reported from Germany, Italy, France and [Greece](#), “most other countries remain far behind Germany and reported a decrease in the number of asylum applications registered last year.”

The seeming contradiction between the drop in arrival figures and continued high levels of asylum applications reflects a situation where, in 2016, many of those who had arrived in 2015 but had not been able to formally register an asylum claim, due to their large numbers, or had avoided doing so finally registered. Also migrants who had arrived before 2015 and lived illegally in Europe may have used the opportunity to register.

Afghan figures

1. a) Arrivals in Europe

Looking at Afghan in-migration, 43,400 individuals had arrived across the Mediterranean in 2016. In the peak year of 2015, it had been almost five times that many, some 200,000 (find an analysis of 2015 trends in this AAN [dispatch](#)). The percentage of Afghans among all arrivals across the Mediterranean Sea dropped from 20 per cent in [2015](#) to 12 per cent in 2016. This drop by almost 80 per cent in their absolute figures is even steeper than the average from all countries.

In 2016, almost all Afghan migrants to Europe continued to arrive in Greece. Only 349 Afghans came to Italy (0.2 per cent of all arrivals) and none to Spain. The large majority of Afghans that arrived in Greece, over 39,000, came before mid-March 2016 when the updated EU-Turkey migration deal kicked in ([here](#) the press release; officially it is called Joint Action Plan the first version of which had come into force in November 2015). After that, Afghan arrival figures in Greece dropped drastically to 1,590 between April and September 2016, ie 265 per month on average.

Relatively smaller numbers of Afghans entered Finland and northern Norway through Arctic Russia, mainly in 2015 and early 2016. The figures for Finland were 720 for 2015, compared to 28 in 2014 and 14 in 2013, according to [this government website](#). In January and February



2016, according to [media reports](#), the numbers increased again to 1,000, before Russia and Finland agreed to close their border for third-nation citizens. Norway and Afghanistan agreed in December 2016 that Kabul would take back 90 per cent of its 4,000 citizens who had crossed the temporarily permeable Russian-Norwegian border close to the polar circle in the same period. (On this, more in part 2 of this dispatch; also see this AAN [dispatch](#)). (1)

1. b) *Asylum applications in Europe*

The trend found above for all countries of origin – that the drop in the number of incoming new migrants in 2016 did not result in a drop of asylum applications over the same period – does also apply for Afghans. After the quarterly figure fell by more than half between the last quarter of 2015 and the first quarter of [2016](#) (from 79,255 to 34,800), figures began rising again from quarter to quarter in 2016. They reached 50,300 in the [second](#) and 62,100 in the third [quarter](#). By then, the total amount was 147,200 or 15.5 per cent of the over 951,000 first time applicants from all countries.

The number reached by the end of the third quarter 2016 indicates that, if the trend continues, the overall figure for 2015 (178,200, ie 14.2 per cent of all applicants and four times more than 2014) might have been reached again in 2016.

By the end of the third quarter of 2016, the largest number of Afghan asylum applications was registered in Germany (102,900) (2) – more than two thirds of their total), followed by Austria (10,100), Hungary (9,800), Bulgaria (6,500), France (4,500), Italy (under 3,900), Switzerland (3,000), Sweden and the UK (2,600 each) and Belgium (2,000). In the third quarter of 2016, Afghanistan featured among the top five countries of origin in 16 EU countries plus in Norway and Switzerland. In four countries, Afghanistan was the most important country of origin, although with comparatively low numbers (Austria 2,185, Hungary 1,610, Bulgaria 100 and Slovenia 70) – see [here](#).

Given all figures above, Afghans remained the second largest ‘national’ group in both categories in 2016, arriving migrants and asylum applicants.

1. c) *Decisions in Europe*

The number of Afghan asylum cases that have been decided upon by member countries’ authorities even in the first instance (there is the right to appeal) remained much lower than the application figure. In the first and second quarters of 2016, decisions were reached on less than 20,000 Afghan cases; figures were picking up in the third quarter with 27,300 decided [cases](#).

These cases still represent only around 20 per cent of the 240,000 Afghan asylum cases that were reportedly pending with the EU by mid-November 2016 – not counting the (unknown) number of Afghans who even had not had a chance or decided not to file an application.

The Europe-wide protection rate for Afghan asylum applicants was above 50 per cent



throughout the three first quarters of 2016. In the first quarter, 4,215 of the 7,415 decided cases (56.8 per cent) ended positively, receiving protection status: There were 3,200 negative decisions. In the second quarter, the rate sank slightly to 53.1 per cent, based on a growing number of cases decided (12,840); 6,820 Afghans received protection while this was rejected in 6,020 cases. That gives an overall protection quota of 54.5 per cent for the first half of 2016. In the third quarter, the rate dropped to 50.7 per cent, with more than twice as many cases decided (27,300) than in the previous quarter. Large numbers of rejected asylum applications do not mean that similar numbers of people have been forcibly deported to their country of origin. In fact, countries such as Germany (until 2015) and Sweden (for some of 2016) generally categorised Afghans as ‘protected from deportation’ for humanitarian reasons, due to the on-going war. But this is now changing (see more below).

The German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine [reported](#) in December 2016, that “for no other country of origin, the recognition quota in the individual EU member-countries differed so widely” in that year as for the Afghans – “from 14 to 96 per cent.” On the other hand, as a UK government figure [shows](#), Afghans were the nationality with the third highest number of positive decisions (6,820 or 53 per cent) in the EU as a whole in the second quarter of 2016.

The AIDA [database](#), with incomplete all-2016 statistics, also reported general “protection disparities” and also specifically for Afghans. The range went from a 30 percent protection rate in Norway to 59 per cent in Belgium. Finland had 42.4, Sweden 45, Greece 48.8, Germany 55.8 and Austria 56 per cent. (3)

Policy changes: sealing borders

The drop in overall arrivals, and Afghan arrivals, reflects the changes in European policies. ‘Temporary’ border controls, even between EU member states, were re-introduced and are still in force. It started in September 2015 with Germany increasing checks at its Austrian border. At the same time, Hungary sealed and started fencing its borders with non-EU Serbia and also with Croatia; also Slovenia fenced its border with Croatia. Croatia did not seal its Serbian border, as in large part it is formed by Sava River and therefore difficult to cross. This was followed by similar measures taken by the Czech Republic, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, France and non-EU states Norway and Switzerland.

At the end of November 2015, authorities in the most affected countries on the Balkan route decided to allow only Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi nationals to cross their borders. This changed on 18 February 2016, when heads of the national police in Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia decided that Afghans could not pass their borders anymore. An AP journalist wrote at the time: “Suddenly, Afghans appear to be the new pariahs of Europe.” Although Germany, as the greatest recipient of Afghan arrivals, profited most from the decision, chancellor Merkel condemned the move at the time, as she realised that this would put a large burden on Greece and might undermine attempts to set up distribution quotas in the EU – which it did (see [here](#)).

A few weeks later, on 9 March 2016, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovenia and Croatia fully closed their



borders to any new migrants with the implicit backing of the [European Union](#), which announced the Turkey deal at the same time. Slovenia's and Croatia's announcements to return to full implementation of the Schengen Border Code had a domino effect among other countries in the region who adopted daily quotas and sought to re-establish greater border control.

As AAN reported at the [time](#), thousands of people got stuck in Greece as well as at various other junctions along the route, with many more on the way from Syria, Afghanistan and other places. In Serbia, which as a result of these measures became an EU antechamber, approximately 800 migrants were stuck in in Preševo (near the Serbian-Macedonian border) and 600 people in Šid (near the Serbian-Croatian border).

On 20 March 2016, the EU-Turkey Action Plan came into force. It stipulated that the legitimacy of asylum claims of all new irregular migrants crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek islands would be checked there and those found illegitimate returned to Turkey. (Read more detail in this [AAN analysis](#) and in this German media [report](#).) But this plan did not work out, as a number of EU countries refused to agree to accept a quota of those legitimate asylum seekers. The EU also did not fully live up to its commitments to send additional migration experts to [Greece](#) and even refused to send some to the Greek islands, as the situation was “too dangerous” [there](#). Furthermore, the Turkish government decided in August 2016 to withdraw its liaison officers from the Greek islands, making the practical implementation of the deal even more [complicated](#). It has repeatedly threatened to cancel the deal with the EU as a result of deteriorating EU-Turkey relations after the crackdown following the July 2016 coup attempts.

Although some EU member countries stuck to their commitment under the deal, only 5,875 asylum seekers entering Greece had been relocated to other EU countries by 28 November 2016, according to the European Stability Initiative, a Berlin-based think tank that reportedly designed the [EU-Turkey deal](#). The same applies for Italy (see more below), from where only 1,802 asylum seekers have been relocated. (Specific numbers about how many Afghans were among them are not available.) The combined figures for Greece and Italy only reach around 5 per cent of the original relocation [target](#). The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants criticised in mid-2016 that “the EU and the overwhelming majority of EU member States have abandoned Greece – a country that is fighting to implement austerity measures – leaving it to deal with an issue that requires efforts from all.” (see [here](#)) Since then, there has been no major change in this situation.

Bulgaria had already started building a fence along most of its border with Turkey in [2014](#). Greece fenced parts of its Turkish land border, near Bulgaria. In early December 2015, Austria began building a fence along its border with Slovenia, the first to be set up between two Schengen [countries](#). Another fence was erected at the border crossing between Norway and Russia. (The Economist has an [interactive map](#) on this.)

For Afghans and others seeking protection, this blocked the way into Europe at the outer EU



border, or at least made access to Europe more risky, costly and dangerous (see [here](#)). A number of them are trying to wait out the situation in Turkey; others changed their minds and are staying in Turkey for good (as this [AAN dispatch](#) showed). Those who had made it into Greece, but were unable to travel on via the closed Balkan route, experienced the Greek government's increasing pressure to file an asylum application there (also a prerequisite for redistribution in the EU, demanded by Greece, which so far has not happened in any significant numbers) (4). The number of applicants in Greece rose from around 1,000 a month (up to February 2016) to over 7,500 in November 2016, reaching almost 47,000 by that month. Among the total were 3,295 Afghans, but their percentage in this group (7 per cent) is very likely way below their actual proportion of the total number of migrants currently in the country. (Here is an amazing NPR radio show about refugees in Greece broadcast in July [2016](#).)

A few months after the closure of the Balkan route, in summer 2016, a number of migrants – including Afghans – used what a local newspaper described as “Europe’s last needle’s eye to the North”: the mountainous and unsealed Italian-Swiss border into Switzerland or further into [Germany](#). According to the Swiss authorities, 4,833 incoming migrants left the country via this route again in 2016, 3,385 of them to [Germany](#). This looked like Switzerland making sure that most incoming migrants would leave the country again. Over the same period, between January and October 2016, Switzerland itself had 3,035 Afghans applying for [asylum](#). (5)

Later, according to Swiss media reports, the country’s border police started to reject migrants at the southern border with Italy, even if they tried to request asylum. NGOs also collected cases, on the Italian side of the Swiss border, of asylum seekers who were rejected even though they had family members in Switzerland which, according to regulations, should have given them [entry](#). Dublin cases – migrants whose entry had been registered in another EU country before and, according to EU law, can be returned there to process their asylum application – and even under-age migrants are often not processed according to the official procedures, says Schweizer Flüchtlingshilfe (Swiss Refugee Help), a leading local support organisation for [migrants](#).

After the temporary opening and closure of the route through Arctic Russia into northern Norway and Finland in late 2015, other ‘exotic’ routes came up during 2016. The Washington Post [reported](#) that Afghan asylum applications in India had “doubled” by early 2016, compared with the year before. In January 2016, the UNHCR New Delhi Factsheet [said](#) that India hosts 13,381 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, mostly settled in and around the capital, Delhi. Other Afghans reportedly tried to cross into the US or Canada by obtaining visas for Cuba, Mexico or other Latin American countries (see [here](#)). A German official [statistic](#) included asylum request figures as of October 2016 from other leading western countries, the US (almost 100,500), Canada (almost 37,000), Australia (over 12,200) and New Zealand (319) but did not specify countries of origin.

Policy changes: turning the trend from influx to return . . .

Following border enforcement measures, the European countries sought to reverse migration



patterns from influx to return. Afghans were one of the groups that received special attention as it is the second largest group in Europe – while a number of governments claimed that the Afghan war was far less destructive than the one in Syria or Iraq and therefore Afghans were mainly ‘economic migrants’. EU and individual member states concluded a number of multi- and bilateral cooperation agreements on migration with the Afghan government. A framework was set with the finalisation of a re-admission agreement, titled the EU-Afghan “Joint Way Forward on Migration,” that was hurried to signature against some last-minute hurdles in Kabul before the October 2016 international Afghanistan conference in Brussels (see detail [here](#); text