

SOLROUTES

Antenna 4 - Türkiye

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FOLLOWING THE ROUTES: TÜRKIYE, THE BORDER WITH IRAN, AND THE BALKANS

General introduction

The main aim of this report is to provide an overview of the state of the art concerning the routes of unauthorized movements that, departing from Iran and Afghanistan, pass through (and often stop in) Türkiye to continue through the so-called Balkan Route towards the EU. In order to do so, it looks at the entanglements, tensions, and connections between these three different areas, as well as the solidarity practices and networks that assist refugees, asylum seekers and people on the move (PoM) in the Turkish territory and along the Balkans.

The common thread linking these routes is the role of the forces of borderization and de-borderization in producing illegality: in each area, the intensification of EU's pressure to reduce the flows reaching Europe has led to tighter collaboration with local governments and to the development of counter-migration and counter-smuggling policies within the frame of what has been defined the 'Europeanisation of migration and border policies' (Hess and Kasparek 2017, p 2). Although some of these countries do not lie along the EU's physical entry point, the EU's externalization governance extends to faraway places where migrants travel, raising the question of whether and how the EU cooperation affects border and migration management (Augustova 2021).

This analysis relies on İközöğlü Erensu and Kaşlı's assumptions (2016) that the experience of transit is hardly spread homogeneously across a country and cannot be isolated at any one scale. People smuggling and crossing along Türkiye's other borders with Iran has been side-lined in policy and research, despite its crucial nature in current migration and other geopolitical dynamics in the region (Augustova and Suber 2023). Hence, an exhaustive analysis of the situation in Türkiye cannot refuse from looking at its south-eastern border and, consequently, the routes and flux of migration from both Iran and Afghanistan, and their continuation in the Balkans. Indeed, it is shown that the package of policies associated with the EU-Türkiye Statement of 2016 influenced refugees and migrants' decision-making in Türkiye and on the Western Balkans route to Europe (Kuschminder et al. 2019).

The document is structured as follows: in the first section (1), it considers the routes from Afghanistan and Iran to Türkiye, trying to stress their role and influence. While most research on migration in Türkiye focuses on Syrian refugees, those who have been intercepted along the Greek borders while trying to move onward to the EU during the last few years have been predominantly Afghan nationals, followed by people from Iran, Pakistan, and Iraq, who have mainly entered Türkiye from Iran (Augustova 2021).

Subsequently (2), the report discusses the development of the legal framework that underpins the categorization of migrants in Türkiye as well as causes to production of various types of illegality. Türkiye plays a primary role today in both the geographic organization of migration routes towards Europe and in the externalization of its border control measures (İkizoğlu Erensu & Kaşli 2016; Sert & Danış 2021). Indeed, it is among the crucial countries on the fringes of the EU, where policies of border control, in the means of logistical, military, and financial support aimed at containing unauthorized migration, have been implemented most effectively. The next section (3) comprises a mapping and summary of solidarity grassroots networks and association on the field, the latter being particularly relevant since one of the aim of the SOULROUTES project is to explore the functioning, the articulations, and the cultural imaginaries of local and translocal networks which share shelter, knowledge, resources, and connections with people in transit to and from Türkiye.

In the final section (4), the report looks at the Balkans as a key corridor located on the edge of political and national borders. The persistence of the Syrian conflict, the intensification of EU pressure to reduce the number of PoM reaching Europe, the turmoil in Türkiye's other borders with Iran and most recent Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan in 2021 are all factors contributing to an unprecedented flow through the country to Europe, taking part in the so-called 'Game' through the Balkan route, which has recently gained prominence (Bjelica 2016; De Genova 2020)). The report concludes by looking at solidarity networks and actors providing a plurality of services to PoM along the route.

Looking backward to the route: the Iran-Türkiye border

This section aims to improve the understanding of the Afghan and Iranian migratory movement towards Türkiye that is intensely associated with regional preconditions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran.

Türkiye's eastern border with Iran is central for the European Commission due to its comprehensive border security system approach, which means to manage migration along its future frontiers. Indeed, broader EU-Türkiye cooperation measures increasingly influences the border landscape and migration around Van, the main transit passing point for those coming from Iran and Afghanistan. The two parties have not only recognized the need to develop better bilateral migration and border approaches at the Iran-Türkiye border but have also been working to develop several military and technology projects, including the construction of a wall and a barbed-wire fence along the border with Iran, together with the deployment of surveillance systems, towers, and drones (Augustova 2021). Indeed, migration management has been re-delegated farther away from the EU's borders to an environment where exclusionary and militarized measures have been present and normalized for decades due to Türkiye's conflict with the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK).

The passage through the border from Iran to Türkiye has been important for those who flee the multiple conflicts that have afflicted Central Asia over the last forty years - from the 1980s Iran-Iraq War (Çetin 2020) to the 2011 Arab Spring (İçduygu 2020), to the most recent Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan in 2021. While public and political debates about EU-Türkiye migration cooperation have centered on the country's western borders (i.e., with Greece), rising levels of EU-Türkiye migration cooperation along the eastern border with Iran and the increasing precarity of migration journeys there have been largely ignored (Augustova 2021; Augustova & Suber 2023). Scientific literature, too, has predominantly focused on the Syrian situation, marginalizing other migratory flows from and to the country. Further research on this topic is urgently needed since those who have been intercepted by state authorities along the Greek borders while trying to move onward from Türkiye to the EU during the last few years have been predominantly Afghan nationals, followed by Iranians who have mainly entered Türkiye from Iran.

Recent emigration from Iran dates back to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when many opponents to the new State as well as many religious minorities had to leave the country.

It has been estimated that 300.000 to 1.5 million Iranians entered Türkiye after the 1979 revolution and stayed there until the end of the 1980s, and according to some estimates provided by Akcapar (2009), the number of Iranian nationals with irregular status in Türkiye fluctuated from 10,000 (İçduygu 2003) to 100,000 to 200,000 (İçduygu 1996), and even up to 500,000 (Narlı 2002) between 1990 and 2000. Beyond the Western countries, thus, Türkiye has become another top destination for Iranians. According to the Iranian Refugees' Alliance, in 2019 Türkiye ranked fourth in the list of countries that received the largest numbers of first instance applications from Iranians, while in 2023 Iranian asylum seekers totaled about 15,000 individuals, making them the third largest asylum-seeking population in the country (UNHCR 2023).

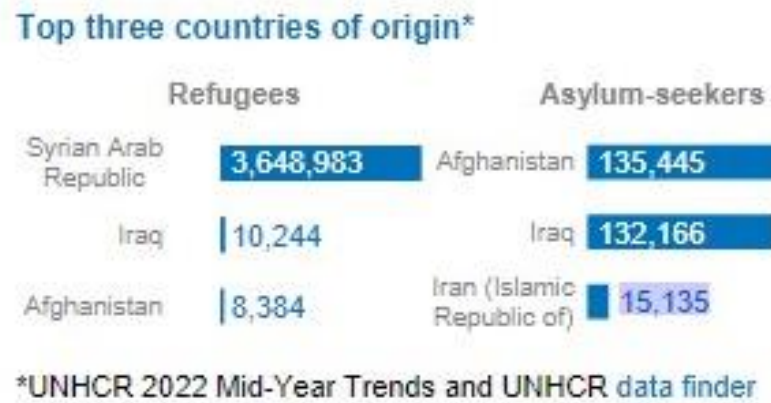


Image n.1. Top three countries of origin of refugees and asylum seekers in Türkiye, February 2023. Source: UNHCR - Refugee Statistics 2023.

Akcapar (2009) asserts that despite their different immigration status, most Iranians think of themselves as temporary or transit migrants who are stopping in Türkiye on their way to reach the EU, though some chose to remain there, where a minority obtained residence permits and even citizenship (Kirişci 2000; Pahlavan 2004).

Witnessing Iran a strong culture of migration (Khosravi 2007), for Iranians emigration stands often in between a rational investment and an urgent necessity; family and personal connections play a relevant role in shaping and developing the idea of emigration, and above all in addressing the *re'ssortissants* toward political asylum, which seems the best option available (Rivetti 2013). In his research among Iranian asylum seekers in Türkiye,

Akcapar (2009) found out that almost half of his respondents had resorted to human smugglers at one point to enter the country illegally, only a tiny minority successfully entering with legal documents but later trying to exit it resorting to smugglers. In a research conducted ten years later, Augustova confirms that there has been an increased demand for human smuggling due to the lack of legal and safe means of travel for migrants fleeing their home countries across the border (Augustova 2021). The monitoring of digital channels and groups used by Iranians and Afghans planning to leave the country, conducted by one of the author of this report, highlights that 1) Türkiye is still the first point of passage to Greece and the EU and 2) the presence of well-established Iranian networks offering paid services all along this route to the EU (the so-called *khodandaz*).

Since Türkiye is still holding the geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, asylum seekers from Iran have to be resettled elsewhere outside the country. For instance, Van, as the closest city to the Iranian border, has a proportionally high number of Iranian asylum seekers, and so there are much research focusing on this area, along with Istanbul, as one of the main urban cities to which they gravitate (Akis Kalaycıoğlu 2016, p. 55).

A comparable discourse applies to Afghans. Today, Afghans are the second biggest displaced population in the world following Venezuelans, being Afghanistan currently the source of one of the largest and long-lasting crises of 'protracted displacement' [1] (GAR forthcoming). Despite this, the Afghan migratory movement, representing a *sui generis* case with respect to its protracted war and violence over four decades, does not receive adequate attention from the international community anymore. In 2015, Afghans were the second largest refugee group within the massive migratory movement from Türkiye to Europe, after Syrians. Since then, they have become the largest migratory group pursuing dangerous routes to reach Europe for asylum. In this journey from Afghanistan to Europe, Türkiye locates on their way as the country of both transit and destination, connecting diverse transnational networks and is, indeed, the third country hosting the largest number of Afghans after Iran and Pakistan (GAR forthcoming). Indeed, most people crossing the Iran-Türkiye border are Afghan nationals (Augustova 2021). The majority of Afghan refugees interviewed in Türkiye by Kuschminder et al. (2019) were leaving Iran due to increasing restrictions on movement, their inability to secure legal work and education opportunities, and increasing deportations to Afghanistan; while many seek to settle in Türkiye temporarily or permanently, others continue non-stop to other regions, mainly in the Global North. The

current circumstances signal a much-required attention to Afghan refugees and their long-lasting precarious living conditions, which in Türkiye has been further worsened since the early 2010s.

According to research by GAR (2021), Afghans in Türkiye live on the margins of precarity. Invisibility enforced by their living conditions simultaneously intersects with the blindness of the international community and civil society towards them. Due to their unauthorized and invisible life, they are abandoned by the regimes of international protection as well as the scope of civil society whose aid and assistance become inaccessible to them. Based on forthcoming research by GAR done between September-December 2022, Afghans are being pushed to illegality by the Turkish state because their applications are not accepted by the Migration Ministry - not by law but *de facto*. Second, some Afghans come to Türkiye to work in agriculture as shepherds especially. The authorities turn a blind eye and let them work in areas far from cities. The NGOs are not allowed to assist or give aid to unauthorized migrants. So, Afghans are not able to apply to legalize their existence in Türkiye and cannot access proper assistance from NGOs because they're unauthorized.

Although both Iranians and Afghans on the move embark upon arduous treks across the Iran-Türkiye border with a well-defined goal –to move from illegality to legality –their chances of formalizing their status upon arrival in Türkiye are almost none: Türkiye's ability and willingness to deport and push back un-wanted migrants in Europe is driven by its negotiations with the EU. As a result, migration management has been re-delegated farther away from the EU's borders to an environment where exclusionary and militarized measures have been present and normalized for decades due to Türkiye's conflict with the PKK. The 2016 Statement failed to create more legal cross-border channels and, thus, put pressure on Turkish authorities to create more repressive policies along their borders with non-EU countries (Augustova 2021).

State of the art about migration, borders, and refugees in Türkiye

In the last three decades, the types, flows, sources, and routes of both authorized and unauthorized migration have become more diversified, leading some scholars to talk about a 'new age of migration' (İçduygu 2005) in Türkiye. It is within this framework that in addition to its well-established role of being a country of emigration across Africa, Asia,

and Europe (Yıldız 2021), from 1990s, Türkiye has progressively also become a key country of immigration and of transit taking on a central role in EU's migration regime and externalization processes (İkizoğlu Erensu & Kaşlı 2016). Türkiye has been pursuing EU membership since the Helsinki Summit of 1999 where its candidacy officially recognized, the country's legislation must incorporate the *acquis communautaire*, which includes the migration and border policies of the EU.

In this section, the state of the art on legal and institutional changes and production of illegality for certain migrant groups through this legal architecture in Türkiye following Europe's externalization policy will be discussed.

Until recently, Türkiye had no regulations specific to migratory movements. As a part of the European human rights system since the beginning, Türkiye signed the Geneva Convention of 1951, but with a geographical limitation, that is to say, it only grants refugee status to those coming from EU countries. Despite maintaining the reserve, the country ratified the 1967 Protocol pertaining to the Status of Refugees, creating a two-tiered system for refugees: while non-European asylum seekers are permitted to apply UNHCR, wait for third country resettlement, and remain in the country during this time, they are not allowed to do so permanently (Muftuler-Bac 2021, p. 296). Since its foundation, Türkiye welcomed migrants identified as Turkish and Muslim and perceived as part of the community, which was also established in the 1934 Settlement Law. Only after arrivals due to the Gulf crisis, Regulation on asylum seekers in 1994 was introduced which was a pioneering legal text aiming to control mass influx of migrants. The government nevertheless inserted a clause declaring that anybody deemed as a threat to the Turkish state might be deported to his or her native country regardless of the safety of the individual concerned, thus the law was far from guaranteeing the protection of asylum seekers. The regulation drew criticism from European governments and human rights organizations (Kirişçi 2012: 67) for prioritizing national security concerns over refugee rights, violating the non-refoulment principle (Muftuler-Bac 2021), failing to provide a comprehensive approach on the asylum procedure and refugee rights (Soykan 2010, p. 8), and having problems with capacity and implementation (Üstübici 2019). While non-European asylum applicants were considered to be transitory and transient, those whose applications were denied either had to return to their place of origin or were made to live in the country illegally.

Between 2003 and 2011, Türkiye established several legislative and institutional frameworks (Özçürümez and Şenses 2011). National Programme on the Adoption of the Accession Partnership (2008) as part of its EU integration efforts served as direction for approving an asylum strategy, creating an asylum authority, and signing a readmission agreement with the EU (Müftüler-Bac 2021, p. 298). The same year, in corporation with UNHCR and IOM, the Migration and Asylum Bureau and the Bureau for Border Management were established which “is indicative of the institutionalization of the migration bureaucracy” (Üstübici 2019, p. 8).

Outbreak of war in Syria and arrival of Syrians in masses enforced the introduction of new regulations, which has been another milestone in the country’s migration governance. At the very beginning of this massive migration, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) was given the mandate to coordinate their reception needs. It took more than two years to make legal adjustments and in April 2014 two major developments were enacted: first, the Department General for Migration Management (DGMM) was established to fix the lack of coordination among the institutions working on migration and asylum. Next, the Parliament passed the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), as a continuation of the Europeanization process of the Turkish migration regime. Within this new law, article 91, made possible to grant the Syrians a temporary protection consisting of three elements: an open-door policy for Syrians; the right of non-refoulement that hinders forced returns to Syria; access to basic public services such as health, education, and to a limited extent, the labor market. Although not specified in the law, in practice Syrians have been granted the right to stay in the country indefinitely.

The EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement in 2013 clearly was an effort of the country to become an EU member which commenced Visa Liberation Dialogue, and at the conclusion, Türkiye pledged to remove the geographical reservation from the Geneva Convention (Kaya 2021, p. 356). The Readmission Agreement's implementation date was planned to be October 2017; however, was accelerated to March 2016 after the 2015 summer. The 2016 coup attempt and its aftermath, a two-year period marked by numerous human rights violations and the de facto suspension of the Parliament, dealt a blow to the dreams of Visa Liberalization and EU membership. However, Türkiye’s gatekeeping role already had been fortified.

The EU-Türkiye Statement put into force on 18 March 2016 has determined an important shift in mass migration routes from the Balkan route towards the African one (starting in Egypt and Libya and ending usually in Malta and Italy). According to scholars (Chetail 2016; Heck and Hess 2017; Roman et al. 2016; Rossi and Lafrate 2016; Peers 2016; Yıldız 2021), although the Statement aimed to decrease irregular migration, disrupt smugglers' 'business models', and open safe routes for people on the move, it has instead increased their vulnerability and exploitation to a large extent. Moreover, it is a highly contested issue whether Türkiye can be considered a safe third country as it maintains its geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention (Ulusoy 2016). In her research on the modus operandi of migrant smugglers in the Aegean region, for instance, Yıldız (2021) argues that this policy development has had some unintended consequences concerning the services of smugglers operating in the Aegean region. First, contrary to its aims, the Statement did not decrease demand for smugglers but left many people stranded in Türkiye. Secondly, to some extent, this further increased their vulnerability and exploitation. For Hathaway, by rationalizing the criminalization of smuggling and increased commitment to border controls, the Protocol raises fundamental human rights concerns regarding the "increased difficulty faced by refugees seeking the legal protections to which they are formally entitled under the Refugee Convention" (Hathaway 2008, p. 35).

Until 2018, UNHCR played an important role in Türkiye 's legal and institutional architecture in the field of migration and asylum, handling both regular and irregular migration. Since then, UNHCR's mandate and responsibilities regarding asylum-seekers and refugees, regardless of their legal status, have been taken over by Presidency of Migration Management (then Directorate General of Migration Management-DGMM). Prior to this, UNHCR had the capacity to receive asylum applications, conduct RSDs and carry out third-country resettlement for individuals it considered eligible. In the case of Syrians, since the TP regime was established, Syrians have been prevented from applying for any form of international protection. "Being stuck in this state of legal limbo applies not only to Syrian migrants, but also to other international asylum seekers who see themselves trapped under the disempowering circumstances resulting from the EU- Türkiye deal, the Turkish bureaucracy, and UNHCR policies" (Heck and Hess 2017, p. 48). After the transfer of UNHCR's capacity, there has been criticism of a lack of transparency in the reception of asylum applications and the RSD process, as well as obstructive behavior by the Migration Presidency.

The number of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers passing through Türkiye to Europe has decreased since the height of the so-called European Migrant Crisis in 2015, but the route remains significant. The 1951 Geneva Convention, the EU border infrastructure, and the legal infrastructure in transit countries all shape and constrain Türkiye's current migration management (Üstübici 2019), and the distinction between categories of asylum seekers and irregular migrants is increasingly hazy (Gökalp Aras and Şahin Mencütek 2018, p. 4).

Türkiye receives thousands of transit migrants chiefly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and some other Asian and African countries who mainly intend to go to the other countries in the European Union. According to the UN Refugee Agency, in February 2023 Türkiye hosts the world's largest refugee population for the ninth consecutive year, with close to 4 million refugees and asylum-seekers under international protection. There is also estimated to be a large, unregistered refugee population that is excluded from these figures (Kuschminder et al. 2019).

Year ↓	Country of Origin	Country of Asylum	Refugees under UNHCR's mandate	Asylum-seekers	IDPs of concern to UNHCR	Other people in need of international protection
2022	Afghanistan (AFG)	Türkiye (TUR)	10,581	128,813	0	-
2022	Iran (Islamic Rep. of) (IRN)	Türkiye (TUR)	5,114	13,084	0	-
2022	Iraq (IRQ)	Türkiye (TUR)	11,855	122,629	0	-
2022	Syrian Arab Rep. (SYR)	Türkiye (TUR)	3,535,898	0	0	-
2022	Unknown (null)	Türkiye (TUR)	2,043	5,621	0	-
2022	Ukraine (UKR)	Türkiye (TUR)	2,768	2,189	0	-

Image n.2. Number of asylum seekers and refugees in Türkiye by nationality. Source: Refugee Data Finder, UNHCR 2022.

That of the Syrian refugees is an exceptional case worth dwelling on a little more deeply. In the early stages of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Syrian refugees mostly clustered in southern Türkiye close to the Syrian border. However, as the protracted nature of the crisis became apparent, they began to move to big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Syrians under the TP regime have to register in certain cities. It is only there that they

can access the rights granted to them. Intercity travel is only possible with permission from the authorities of the province where they are registered. However, due to the difficulty of finding a job, kinship relations, etc., many Syrians live in cities other than the ones they are registered in, which renders them irregular within the country. It should also be noted that not all Syrians are under the TP. When a Syrian under the TP living in a place other than the registration city subjected to any form of identity check, they are either sent back to the cities where they were registered or deported to Syria. The number of those who have been granted citizenship through the much-discussed 'exceptional citizenship' is reported to be around 223,881 by the end of 2022 (Mülteciler Derneği 2023), although there is no data available to public. In addition to those in the country with residence permits, there are also a large number of irregular Syrians.

Although Türkiye was partly successful in realizing the rules of the TP Regulation aligning with the EU *acquis*, the discursive frames used by the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, AKP) government and relevant state actors in approaching Syrians refugees have led to a de-Europeanization of migration and asylum processes. Moreover, the increasing polarization and complication of Turkish political life in the last decade has also meant a shift in the political discourse and the framing of Syrian refugees as 'guests', which, for Kaya (2020) is no longer sustainable, neither in terms of accommodating their urgent needs, nor in coming to terms with an increasing of racist and xenophobic attitudes among the local populations. Political parties in the country securitize the Syrian refugee crisis through their political discourses, which result in the rise of xenophobia among the population; members of the CHP, as instance, claim that the Syrians are the source of major crimes and unemployment (Gulmez 2019). The 2023 earthquake and the 2023 political election have further exacerbated this situation; the AKP administration began enforcing severe regulations after concluding that the migrant issue could undermine its chances of regaining the elections. As a result, the number of deportations increased and a 'deconcentration policy' began to be implemented.

Growing economic and financial crisis in Türkiye in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 shaped further societal and political divides and divergence in a way that has led to the scapegoating of Syrian refugees by many native groups as well as to the rise of Arabophobic feelings. As a consequence, emphasis is now on the return of the Syrians either to their home cities or to the zones under the government's control, which is in the process of being constructed by the international forces at the Turkish- Syrian

border (Kaya 2020). In the midst of this growing stream of the return discourse, Syrians under TP have started to feel even more threatened when the gas drilling polemic came up between the EU and Türkiye on the shores of Cyprus in the summer of 2019, which has resulted in the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu's statement regarding the unilateral suspension of the Readmission Agreement, which has been subject to instrumentalization by Türkiye as a bargaining chip with the EU. The crisis resulted in the EU's financial assistance sanctions on Türkiye; in return, Türkiye announced it would suspend the Readmission Agreement operating since March 2016. However, returns can still take place under the EU-Türkiye Statement from Greece to Türkiye. Such destabilizing factors and the ongoing ambiguity about the future have made some of the Syrians to consider fleeing to the Greek islands.

For people other than Syrians who are not under international protection, access to basic rights is not possible. It has become quite challenging for them to submit applications for international protection; nearly exclusively, those with several vulnerabilities are able to submit their request. Increased migration to Türkiye on the one hand, while making registration more difficult on the other, results in the growth of illegality. Deportation is a continual threat for those who cannot or do not want to register. In addition, they are forced to work informally in conditions of precarity in order to continue their journey or to earn a living in Türkiye.

Since a few years ago, Afghans have been singled out, demonized, and criminalized. Afghans have become the focus of hostility and xenophobia since reports of huge groups of Afghan men entering the nation surfaced. In keeping with this, the government enforces stricter regulations on Afghans in order to demonstrate that they have effective migration control. Afghans were deported in considerably greater numbers than other nations. In addition, random identity checks on streets and deportation procedures have escalated. According to MMP, about 110.000 unauthorized people were deported in 2022, and among them, 61,617 Afghan nationals were deported by 206 charter flights (İçişleri Bakanlığı 2022). In addition, human rights observers reported unlawful repatriation of Syrians (HRW 2022).

Civil Society and Solidarities in Türkiye

The number of NGOs and civil initiatives that assist migrants, refugees, and the PoM in Türkiye has increased both quantitatively and qualitatively since the start of the migratory flows from Syria in 2011. Solidaristic acts of citizens emerged as a reaction to arrival of displaced Syrians, however, faded considerably in a few years. Hence, while literature on NGOs is much broader (Mackreath and Sağnıç 2017; Sunata and Tosun 2019; Özgür Keysan and Şentürk 2021; GAR 2022), research on solidaristic acts and movements is rare (Dağtaş and Can 2022; Karakayalı Polat 2018; Körükmez 2018; Genç 2017; Ataç et al. 2016).

As Türkiye has been the target of both immigration and transit flows due to natural disasters, political and economic unrest in the region, and because it is on the route to the EU, civil actors and NGOs emerged prior to this flow, though in a way that cannot be compared to today. In the 2000s, Türkiye has become a waiting room for migrants from African countries for both those waiting to cross the border and those waiting to finalize third country resettlement of UNHCR. In this period, associations serving refugees, albeit on a small scale, were established amid the transformation and expansion (and NGO-isation) of civil society in Türkiye as a direct result of the objective for full accession to the EU between 2000-2010s.

In the face of the influx of refugees fleeing the war in Syria, the state and non-governmental organizations as well as citizen humanitarianism and individualized forms of compassion and solidarity (Stanarevic´ and Rokvic´ 2021, p. 62) have emerged. Informal solidarity initiatives in various forms mobilized without receiving fundings but depending on donations from individuals, mostly in big cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara as well as high number of refugee receiver cities such as Gaziantep and Kayseri. Their worldviews, resources, and issues/problems differ greatly. However, many of the initiatives later changed their status to an association, either for legal or financial reasons. Nonetheless, there are comparatively fewer attempts in Islamic faith-based networks to turn into official associational organizations. This is partly because there is less monitoring of these organizations' fundraising and relief efforts. Since the 1990s, some of those networks have been assisting PoM, along with the country's other marginalized groups. On the other hand, it is only after 2010s that migrant solidarity movements emerged from leftist circles (Genç 2017), which, as mentioned above, also faced sustainability problems.

In the early days of Syrian migration, international humanitarian agencies needed to collaborate with local associations due to the lack of authorization and difficulty to meet the needs of such a large number of people. “In this period, while some of the NGOs established in the 1990s adapted their activities to the new context, new ones were also founded to meet the mounting needs. Humanitarian organizations in eastern Türkiye, and especially in the border provinces, and Islamic charitable organizations in major western cities mobilized to meet the urgent needs of refugees. Rights-based civil society organizations, in the face of these emerging needs, rapidly began the process of institutionalization” (GAR 2022, p. 8).

In the 2010s, Türkiye steered towards an increasingly authoritarian regime and at the same time, the pressure on civil society increased. The failed coup d'état on July 15, 2016, marked a turning point including the field of migration. During the two-years long state of emergency period the country governed by emergency decrees. In this process, more than 1000 non-governmental organizations, including organizations serving Syrian refugees, were closed down and many of them experienced fear of being closed down (Altunkaynak Vodina 2019, p. 2) by the decrees, and some INGOs had their Turkish registration documents revoked. INGOs continue to provide humanitarian aid to refugees in Türkiye in collaboration with local NGOs and Turkish official institutions (such as Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and Turkish Red Crescent) (Aras and Duman 2018). The Turkish government wanted to establish and maintain its absolute regulatory role in the migration and civil society fields in order to control the monetary sources flowing into this area through civil society and to continue using immigrants as a chip in international negotiations (Körükmez 2022). In December 2020, the government further increased the pressure on civil society by enacting a new law titled ‘Preventing the Financing of Weapons of Mass Destruction’, under the guise of ‘fighting terrorism’, which has been a conveniently accepted argument within the society.

In addition, official surveillance of NGOs varies greatly between cities and has a significant impact on how they operate. The control and repression in border cities, especially in Kurdish cities, are higher than western big cities. When working with PoM groups who are not under TP or international protection, this disparity is most pronounced. Renting homes, providing accommodation, and accompanying them to places such as hospital were made illegal in 2019 by an amendment to the LIFP, even if done unintentionally or for humanitarian reasons. The amendment has been criticized for containing very vague wording,

leading to arbitrariness and interpretation by law enforcement forces. Therefore, NGOs are subject to legal limitations when offering services to those without documentation. Their financing, on the other hand, frequently targets particular groups. In other words, contributors decide who gets the money and what kinds of activities can be funded. Therefore, NGOs can only provide minimal or no funding for PoM.

Despite these limitations, it is important to present a framework of civil society actors working in the field of migration and asylum in Türkiye because, as will be seen in the details below, other actors functioning as associations or foundations also provide support to persons not under international protection or TP in various ways.

The relationship between the State and civil society, however, cannot be simplified to a top-down approach or state repression on civil society (Danış and Nazlı 2018). Rather, we can speak of a plural civil society with different ideologies, aims, forms of organization and modes of operation. Therefore, neither clear-cut nor inclusive classification is possible. Instead of attempting to be exhaustive, this report will present a broad picture based on its salient characteristics.

Regular only-Refugees and Migrants NGOs

Since the arrival of Syrian refugees, the civil society has accelerated the adoption of an international neo-liberal humanitarian aid regime with the onset of INGO and other donors. The drive for efficiency has led to a proliferation of highly specialized NGOs, working with limited objectives and target groups under schemes (Sözer, 2019) of projects have prevailed despite the complexity of migration phenomenon. Furthermore, due to the restrictions of donors, NGOs have to limit 'beneficiaries' of their programs based on nationality and legal statuses as well as gender and age markers as signifiers of vulnerability. Authoritarian regime in surge in the country on the one hand, the increasing pressure of political and financial control on NGOs on the other, have caused them to withdraw into service-only framework rather than advocacy so that they can function, without becoming a target. In reality, the state makes it simpler for NGOs to function in circumstances where they don't openly criticize the administration and collaborate closely with it.

Islamic NGOs

Islamic NGOs refer to Islamic moral norms and duty-oriented terminology, and provide social reproduction in a morally upstanding manner, connecting the private domain to the traditional collective ideals of the family, country, and Islam (Atalay 2019, p. 436). In accordance with the values that refers to Islam and Islam brotherhood, those NGOs tend to serve more Muslim refugees, being criticized of enhancing selective humanitarianism (Karakayalı Polat 2018, p. 506). Nonetheless, faith-based understanding of solidarities abled to mobilize huge number of resources for refugees through large NGOs as well as individual and 'occasional solidarists' which are vital for PoM.

NGOs for women/Feminists NGOs

Women and children, as well known, have been the primary target groups of humanitarian aid and NGOs of any kind, and the Turkish case is not an exception. NGOs with diverse trajectories have assistance and/or programs of any kind for women refugees, although with different aims and methods. Keysan and Şentürk (2020) have shown varieties of understanding NGOs (that were sub-classified as Philanthropists, Professionals and Feminists). Feminist movement has a very long history and is still one of the strongest in Türkiye in the face of authoritarian rule that seeks to curb rights of women and LGBTIQ+ communities. The movement has created its civil society including NGOs. Since the number of refugees increased in Türkiye, those NGOs also launched programs for refugee women. Due to funding regimes of donors, some of them have become only refugee women NGOs. Yet, the solidarity vs. charity dichotomy and the inclusion of refugee women's experiences in programs are problematic, and social hierarchies, tensions, and mutual distance entangles (Dağtaş and Can, 2022).

Human rights organizations

After the coup d'état in 1980 and following authoritarian regime, the first human rights NGO established in 1986. NGOs advocating for human rights and organizations working in specialized rights areas such as LGBTIQ+, have flourished in 2000. These groups have begun to operate in the area of immigration and asylum, much as women's organizations. If the NGO have special program, such as rehabilitation of torture survivors, they included refugees as well. In addition, some among the human rights NGOs follow racist attacks,

lynching incidents as well as rights violations conducted by the police, gendarmerie, and the other authorities. Their work is priceless under neo-liberal authoritarian regime where many of NGOs can't face the authorities. However, many of them operate without any special program or training to work with refugees.

Migrant-led organizations

Türkiye grants the right to establish and be a member of associations for persons who have the right to reside in the country. Almost all migrant associations are organized on the basis of nationality or ethnicity. Among these, Syrian and Afghan associations stand out. Majority of the associations established by Syrians mostly work on cross-border, on the Syrian territory controlled by Türkiye. Founded by naturalized Afghans who arrived in Türkiye in the 1980s and 1990s, these associations play an informal gatekeeper role in ensuring that their newly arrived co-nationals receive aid and humanitarian protection (Karadağ and Sert 2023). The majority of these associations are pro-government. They usually try to keep a low profile and avoid open criticism of government policies because, on the one hand, they have to work with the government in order to work cross-border, and on the other hand, they trust the AKP government to accept migrants. In addition, the AKP is a preferable alliance in the face of the anti-migrant stance of the opposition.

Other organizations

Despite the limited scope of the civil society space in Türkiye, there are also certain institutions that work for refugees, in the face of an unprecedented fluxes of migration from Syria, in addition to ongoing ones from Afghanistan, Iran, and African countries. Municipalities, bars, professional bodies, and unions have assistance and programs for refugees in various forms and degrees.

While meso-level actors municipalities have the potential to play an important role to provide service and support, however not all take it due to the political polarization that is closely related to attitudes towards the refugees in the country. The municipalities of AKP have a more pro-refugee stance, while opposition parties nourish anti-refugee and exclusionary rhetoric. Hence, even though some of opposing party's municipalities provide assistance to

refugees, they choose to keep a low-profile on the matter to avoid criticism from their supporters.

Unions' and professional bodies' positions regarding refugees are quite complicated and problematic. Depending on the political view and affiliation, some have a positive attitude and more visibility to advocate for the refugees however without any concrete action.

Bars are vital in the struggle for refugees and their rights to train solicitors for cases of PoM and those who are not under international protection, to watch the violations and to warn the other about the possible consequences of amendments. Most importantly, since in recent years detention centers have become inaccessible for observers, NGOs, and human rights defenders, bars and detainees' lawyers have become almost the only actors that can have information about what happens inside the walls where violations happen frequently.

The Balkan route: the informal geography of 'The Game'

The denomination of 'Balkan Route' describes the movements of mainly Asian PoM who originally entered Europe through the Bulgarian-Turkish or Greek-Turkish land or sea borders and then proceed, through Bulgaria or Greece and FYR Macedonia towards Serbia and further to countries of the EU (Bobić and Sankovic 2017).

Although unauthorized transit migration flows have a long-established history in this area, dating back to the 1980s, the route has gained predominance during the so-called 'long summer of migration' in 2015 when an unprecedented number of refugees driven by war and violence from the Middle East entered Europe from Türkiye to Greece (Thorpe 2019). This increase should be at least in part attributed to the breakout of civil wars in the Arab region after 2011 and the subsequent advancements of the Islamic State (IS) and denotes why these paths have been privileged over others at that particular point in time (Della Porta 2018). Its analysis and monitoring are crucial for two main reasons: first, for a huge number of people, Türkiye is one of the very first steps of the route to enter the EU. Second, the Balkan region constitutes a fundamental component within the EU's externalization strategies as Europe extends eastward toward Türkiye as the perhaps most enduring Orientalized frontier (Mastnak 2003).

The shift to this previously marginal path for irregular entry into the EU led to the collapse of the EU's external border in the Aegean and turned the long-standing problem of the deficient common asylum policy, which disproportionately affected the southern member States, into a full-fledged crisis (Weber 2016). The emergence of this route has suddenly shifted the geographical gravity of the refugee-related migrations towards, complementing the existing maritime routes in the Mediterranean with new overland itineraries (Bobić and Sankovic 2017).



Image n.3. Map of the Western Balkans route, including both the primary, Serbia- centered route, and the emerging sub-route through Bosnia and Herzegovina. Source: Kuschminder et al. 2019

The 2016 EU-Türkiye Deal sanctioned the formal closure of the Balkan Route to the PoM (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020), stopping the flow across the Aegean Sea practically overnight (Weber 2016). With this official ‘closure’, pathways into the EU became scarcer, creating in fact a legal limbo where thousands of people suddenly remained abandoned in dire living conditions (Bobić and Sankovic 2017). While it is not the aim of this section to address the deal specifically, it is crucial to remember how the package of policies associated with it have been influencing PoM’s decision-making in Türkiye and on the Western Balkans route to Europe from 2015 onwards (Kuschminder et al. 2019).

How the functioning of the route has developed in the last decade remains an important element of investigations, especially if put in relation to the presence of new walls on the borders of several Balkan countries and, at the same time, to the continuity of the border crossings along what has become a structured route in the core of Europe (Bobić &

Sankovic 2017). Over the past years and despite the emergence of some clear patterns, migration flows through the Balkan Route kept on changing as a reflection of the variable articulations of the route, the different migration management strategies implemented by the single countries, and the area of origin of the individuals. It has been possible to witness a substantial rise in the number of people attempting ‘the Game’, that is how PoM describe their efforts to informally travel to Western Europe via the Route with irregular means and claiming asylum in several European states (Cvejić and Babović 2014; Minca and Collins 2021). In this context, the Balkan Peninsula has become increasingly weighty for the informal movements since it has experienced the emergence and the consolidation of a key route used by thousands of individuals, traveling through Türkiye, Greece, FYR Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia to reach their final destinations in Europe. According to the report made by the organization ‘RiVolti ai Balcani’, in 2019 more than 15.000 people crossed this route, of whom 5.300 Afghans, 4.600 Syrians and 1.500 Iraqis (*The Balkan route. Migrants without rights in the heart of Europe*, 2020). Although these numbers are really low compared to those of 2015, they nevertheless highlight the weight of this route.

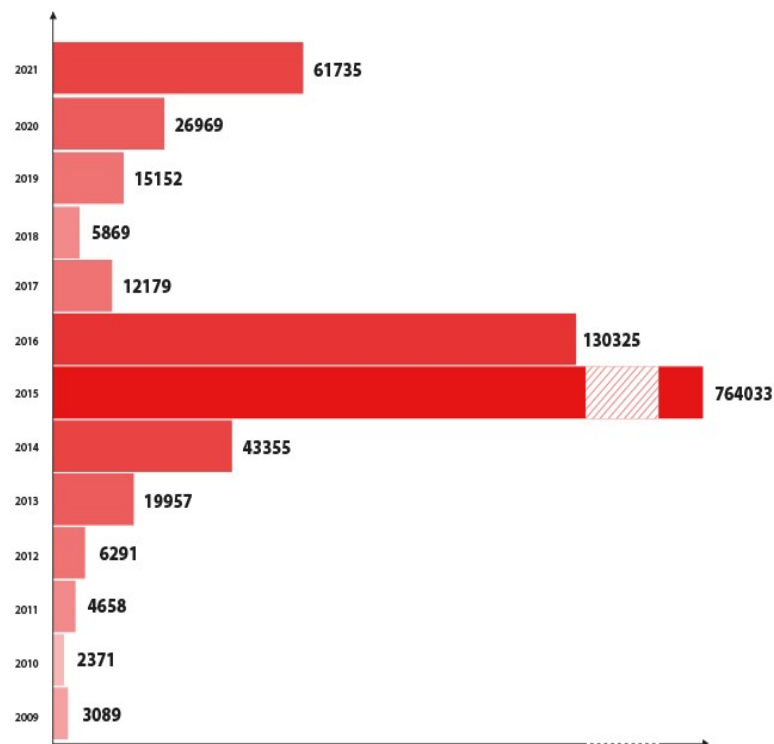


Image n. 4. Illegal border crossings on the Western Balkans route in numbers.

Source: Frontex, 2023

As reported by several PoM met during previous fieldworks at the Massi shelter in Oulx in the past months, their trajectory is not linear but fragmented: the routes are often followed in a counter-intuitive and creative ways, through anti-geographical or zigzag journeys that are influenced by the concrete obstacles in the field.

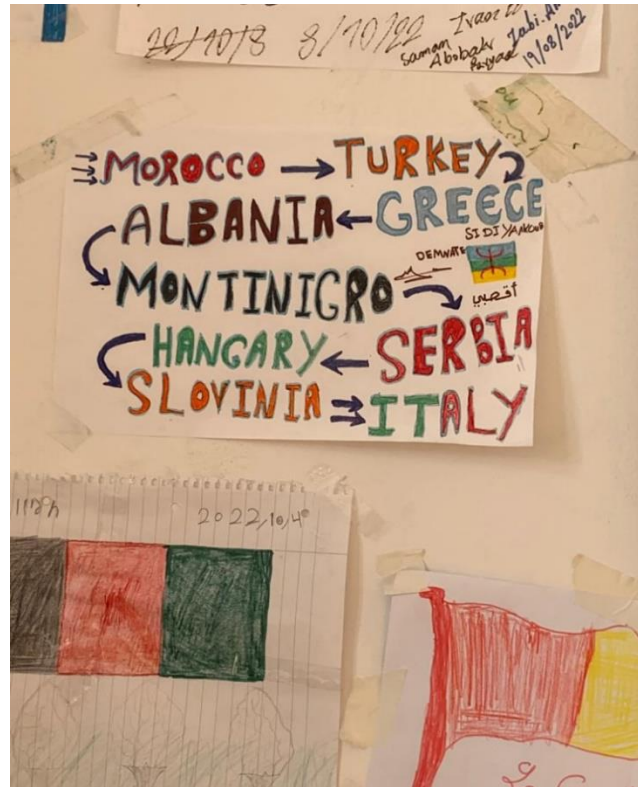


Image n. 5. Picture taken at the Massi shelter in Oulx, February 2023

For Milan and Pirro (2018), the long summer of migration has seemingly provided the occasion for the mobilization of a whole range of collective actors, since the issue of immigration had overridden concerns such as the economic situation for the first time since the break-out of the Great Recession. Such involvement in support of migrant populations took different forms, involved rather different actors, and took place in different locations.

There exists currently a vibrant and active network of organizations and individuals performing politics of solidarity and altruism along the route, interpreted as forms of contention ranging from civil disobedience to solidarity action (Della Porta 2018), whose most crucial activity consists of offering solidarity to the PoM, monitoring, and reporting the violence and

responsibilities of European authorities and States. All of these activities can be ultimately interpreted as reactions to the poor responsiveness of public authorities: indeed, solidarity acts aimed to overcome the limited (financial and human) resources available to civil initiatives in support of migrant populations (Milan and Pirro 2018). The main initiatives carried out by these actors can be summarized as follows:

1. First Aid on the spot to people who cannot access public healthcare systems, preventing diseases through the distribution of hygiene kits, scabies packs and laundry service, and also covering the cost of the treatment for cases in need of specialized medical care, such as dentists, dermatologists, or ophthalmologists. Psychological support, cultural mediation and translation services are offered as well.

2. Distribution of food packs and warm clothes, including shoes, blankets or sleeping bags, to provide the people with means for their self-protection. Also, some associations distribute shopping vouchers so the people can exchange them for food or hygiene items in local stores, choosing what they need at each moment. One of the most active organizations in this field is 'No Name Kitchen' (NNK), an independent movement made of activists working to promote humanitarian aid and political action for those who suffer the difficulties of extreme journeys and violent pushbacks.

3. Advocacy activities and collection of the testimonies of people who suffer abuses at the borders to produce monthly and special reports on illegal pushbacks within the goal of raising awareness and to advocate for a change in policy making at national and UE level. Since 2016, ASGI (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione) has been working in the Italian-Slovenian border, the Adriatic ports and along the Balkan route through monitoring activities, strategic causes supporting the freedom of movement in the Schengen space, the creation of a group of Italian and foreign experts who actively collaborate to study legal strategies and actions to protect the rights of foreign citizens, advocacy activities, and activities to support individuals working in the field through technical support and training. Another grassroots NGO dedicated to helping refugees is the volunteer-run group 'Are You Syrious?', operating in Greece, Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, which advocates open borders and fair treatment for all the PoM and provides daily support to the refugees and asylum seekers.

Against a backdrop of institutional closure, and the difficulty of several opposition parties to take up a humanitarian position without facing setbacks in their support rates, pro-

migrant activists in the route evidently face significant constraints in their mobilizations. As Amnesty International commented in the 2018 report 'Pushed to the edge. Violence and abuse against refugees and migrants along the Balkans route', both Are You Syrious? and the Centar za Mirovne Studije (CMS) in Zagreb have suffered serious consequences in terms of accusations and pressure for their work, being discredited in the media on several occasions by the Croatian Ministry of the Interior and seeing the preclusion of the social activities carried out inside and outside the camps for many years. Other organizations in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina suffered similar fates in 2019. The NNK and Aid Brigade NGOs, have been subject to repeated harassment and checks by police to the point of criminalizing their work.

Conclusions

The overall aim of this report was to bring into dialogue the different dimensions that contribute to making Türkiye, its border with Iran, and the Balkans, such crucial nodes in both the geographic organization of migration routes towards Europe and in the externalization of its border control measures (İkizoğlu Erensu & Kaşlı 2016; Sert & Danış 2021).

The reports suggests that externalization project of European borders, implemented with the aim to "improve their capacity for migration management and refugee protection, prevent and combat illegal immigration" (European Council 2004) and achievement of "greater political, security, economic and cultural cooperation" (European Council 2004), does not only move outwards from the European center, and then straightforwardly get implemented by the passive 'others'; the case of Türkiye epitomizes how these other actors are geopolitical subjects with their counter-discourses and strategies as well as their co-constitutive roles in shaping the very framework of the process (Karadağ 2019).

A migrant sending, migrant receiving, refugee hosting, and transit migration country all at the same time (Kuschminder et al. 2019), the situation of Türkiye cannot be fully comprehended without a broader perspective that takes into account both its nature as a destination for millions of Iranians, Afghans, and Syrians who, voluntarily or not, stop here, and as a transit hub for those who, for the most part, decide to continue their journey to the EU via the Balkan route. Mapping the broader implications of EU-Türkiye cooperation on migration

across diverse borders is of great importance, especially as the 2016 statement is being renegotiated and a new chapter in EU-Türkiye relations is about to open (Augustova 2021).

This report has also attempted to provide an overview of civil initiatives and solidarity in Türkiye and the Balkan route, the latter being a constantly shifting battleground where EU and various government policies collide not only with increasingly fluid and changing flows, but also with the growing number of both local and international solidarity and altruism initiatives.

In Türkiye, many solidarity groups had to convert to association status due to the financial and political difficulties of existing as civil initiatives outside of independent and formal organizations. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment and racism have stifled 'citizen humanitarianism'.

It is not possible to understand the nature of civil society and solidarities without showing the processes, acts, and actors through which certain groups are illegalized. For this reason, this report shows how illegality is produced as a result of Türkiye 's EU accession process and externalization policy. This legal architecture and Türkiye 's increasing pressure on civil society exclude illegalized groups from benefiting from civil society actions. When the low capacity of solidarity groups that are not organized as NGOs is added to this picture, as a result, thousands of people are left without any support. At the same time, there is hardly any work on solidarity between settled refugees and PoM, and we know very little about what is happening in this area. The Turkish leg of the SOULROUTES project will make an important contribution to filling the gap in solidarities literature.

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[1] UNHCR defines 'protracted displacement' as "a situation in which 25,000 or more refugee from the same country have been living in exile for at least 5 consecutive years in a given host country, and find themselves in a state of limbo, unable to return or without rights to live permanently elsewhere" (Crawley and Kaytaz 2022, p. 6).

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