



Afghan Exodus: Afghan asylum seekers in Europe (2) – the north-south divide

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The situation and number of Afghan migrants in Europe differed from country to country in 2016. The division lay, roughly, along the Alps. To the south, the number of incoming migrants, though still high, dropped but requests for asylum continued to rise in some countries. Living conditions, meanwhile, deteriorated sharply. To the north, much fewer new Afghan migrants arrived – particularly after the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal on migration – while the number of asylum requests also grew in certain countries while they fell sharply in others. The general treatment of and sentiment towards migrants became less generous. Among those Afghans stuck along borders in the south or threatened with deportation in the north, hopelessness has been growing. AAN's Thomas Ruttig gives an overview. (See part 1 – on figures, trends and a changed environment here: [Afghan Exodus: Afghan asylum seekers in Europe \(1\) – the changing situation](#)). Part 3, a case study of Germany, will follow in two days.)

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 Sari Kouvo and Ann Wilkens from the AAN advisory board (Sweden).



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The situation for Afghans in Mediterranean countries

As a result of tighter border controls and stricter migrations policies, many refugees are now stuck between the almost hermetically closed outer borders of the EU as well as between individual EU countries. A significant number of them are Afghans; most of them are now stranded in Turkey, Greece and Serbia. (The countries on the Iberian peninsula do not play a role here as they are too far from the main entry route across the Aegean Sea in the eastern Mediterranean region.)

Turkey

Turkey hosted between 111,000 and 160,000 Afghan migrants in the summer of 2016. (1) As AAN [reported](#) in September 2016, they came with different strategies and aims. Many thousands of them have stayed in Turkey and built an expatriate community that both aids and exploits those passing through. Some of them diversified their ‘business’ following the EU-Turkey deal, branching out into a broad array of activities, from renting out accommodation and arranging jobs for their compatriots, to drug-running. Others have opted for legal resettlement in Turkey. The country operates several ‘deportation centres’, including in Pehlivan köy in the European part and Erzurum on the north coast (see [here](#)) as well as in the extreme east, near the borders with Syria and Iran. Access for UNHCR, journalists and volunteers is limited.

Greece

Greece has become one of the main victims of the EU’s failure to develop a distribution system for arriving asylum seekers among its member states. While more asylum seekers arrived in 2016 (although in lower numbers than in 2015), only a small number of them were relocated to other EU countries (for more figures, see part 1 of this [dispatch](#)).

As a result of this failure – as well as the fences built along parts of its Turkish land border near the triangle with Bulgaria – there were 63,000 [migrants stuck in Greece](#) as of December 2016, 49,000 of them on its mainland in over forty camps. Around 3,000 of the total were [children](#). Accommodation facilities are [overcrowded](#), with people sleeping outdoors and many without access to [drinking water](#). This is particularly the case on the Greek islands near the Turkish coast from where most of the Afghan migrants in 2015 crossed over into the EU, but also in the capital, Athens. (This [website](#) has some vivid visual impressions about the situation on the Greek mainland) It has been repeatedly reported how under-age refugees, among them Afghan boys, have been forced into the [sex trade](#). The EU, according to this [report](#), does not want Greece to ferry any migrants to its mainland, as this could be interpreted as a reopening of the Aegean route.



The overcrowded conditions have led to several riots in [camps](#), growing tensions with parts of the local [population](#) and attacks by anti-immigrant [groups](#). According to a media report in December 2016, 13,000 of those registered in Greek refugee camps are unaccounted for and could have slipped further north into Europe, according to European immigration [officials](#). At the same time, there is still a wide array of volunteer support for the migrants (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Again, there is no official data on how many Afghans are among the migrants in Greece (read [here](#) or [here](#)). The number of Afghan asylum seekers was relatively low, along the 2015 figure which was 1,545. (2) But given what is known, Afghans make up a more significant number of those staying there.

According to the [UNHCR](#), one measure by the Greek asylum authority was important “for Afghans in particular”: a re-registration campaign that was started on 8 June 2016 open to those who entered Greece between 1 January 2015 and 20 March 2016. As a result, over 15,500 asylum-seekers on the Greek mainland received temporary cards, valid for one year, that allow them to reside legally in Greece while awaiting a final decision on their asylum applications. It also gives them the right to access services and should help identify those eligible for family reunification or relocation. The particular importance for Afghans point to their significant number, but also to their dire situation as, according to the UNHCR, the initial entry documents of most of them, known as “police notes,” had expired. As a result, their presence in Greece had technically become illegal, which could have resulted in arrest and possible deportation. A likely result of this was that Greece had the second largest number of Afghans voluntarily returning to their country in 2016 after Germany; this number rose from 152 in 2015 to 1,257 in 2016, according to IOM figures.

Many Afghans are thought to have applied for these cards mainly to avoid possible deportation to Turkey, as many still aim to travel onwards if the chance arises. Deportations from Greece to Turkey have, however, not happened – apart from a few [exceptions](#) – as Greece does not consider Turkey a safe third country.

Italy

In Italy, Afghans have not even been among the top 10 nationalities of asylum seekers since 2012 ([here](#), p 89). Their numbers have grown steadily, however, over the last few years, peaking in 2015 with 3,975 applicants. The closure of the Balkan route in early 2016 stopped that trend again. Asylum requests by Afghans per month fell from 665 in January 2016 to 118 in August. Although their number started to grow again in later months, altogether fewer Afghans are likely to have applied for asylum at the end of 2016, compared to 2015.

Numbers of Afghan asylum seekers may be relatively low, however the recognition rate for them in Italy is high (over 97 per cent in 2015, with 3,280 Afghans granted protection). Most of the Afghans arrive and apply for asylum in north-eastern Italy. Trieste, and on a smaller scale Udine and Gorizia, on the eastern border with Slovenia, host a comparative majority of Afghan refugees. (3) Afghan asylum applicants usually wait around six to nine months before their



asylum hearing. After the recognition, the duration of state support can vary from a few days to more than a year, depending on the area and the type of reception facility the refugees are hosted. (4) Some Italian prefectures allow them to remain in the reception system with the same benefits granted before the hearing for up to six months after the recognition, while others urge them to become fully independent the very day they are issued their asylum documents. Only a fraction of those who receive the protection can, once they exit this primary reception system, access specific projects known as SPRAR, that provide refugees with additional state support of up to one year and spread across the country.

In addition to the Afghans who travel directly to Italy, there is a sizeable back-flow of “Dublin cases” (5) from central and northern European countries. The BBC [reported](#) in September 2016 that in the northern province of Udine alone, there had been about 5,000 migrants entering from Austria since the start of that year alone, “about 90% of them... from Pakistan or Afghanistan and “the overwhelming majority” young men. Most of these Dublin cases eventually obtain protection in Italy, at the price of longer waiting times and considerable stress over the fear of being sent back if there is another country of first entry, from where they would often face a further deportation to Afghanistan.

For the most part, Afghans asylum seekers in Italy were until now transitory refugees many of whom, even after they had obtained their asylum documents, continued to try to reach Scandinavian countries, Germany or the UK. Apart from some early Hazara refugees who came in the 1990s, Italy does not have a large Afghan diaspora into which substantial numbers of newcomers could easily integrate and access the job market. Although this may slowly be changing, especially in big cities such as Rome or Milan, these communities’ capacity may not be sufficient to accommodate the growing number of Afghans with Italian asylum documents who have returned in the last two years after facing increasing difficulties in finding residence and work – even informally – in other European and who, in Italy, are now quickly being exited from the reception system.

Serbia

Serbia hosted between 6,200 and 10,000 migrants by the end of November 2016, as more continued to arrive despite the closure of the Balkan route in early 2016 (see AAN reporting [here](#)). By 31 October 2016, the Serbian Asylum Office had registered 10,201 individuals who expressed their intention to seek asylum, of whom 4,447 were Afghans. According to Serbian policy, a foreigner can express “the intention to seek asylum”; s/he is then “recorded” (rather than registered). The asylum seeker then needs to report to an asylum official or asylum centre within 72 hours to register the actual request (see also [here](#)).

A recent media [report](#) from Belgrade said that, according to the local branch of Save The Children, on average 100 additional refugees had entered the country per day throughout December 2016, many of them Afghans. In total 40 per cent were children and one quarter of these children were unaccompanied; an estimated 75 per cent of the unaccompanied children came from Afghanistan. The newspaper reported about a group of children who were



respectively three, nine, ten and eleven years old. In August 2016, it was [reported](#) that “a hunter” in Serbia had shot a 20-year old Afghan refugee who had illegally crossed the Bulgarian border.

UNHCR Serbia, in its updated [report](#) of December 2016, said it and its partners had “encountered” around 6,900 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in the country. Over 5,500 (ie 80 per cent) were accommodated in thirteen governmental facilities, while the remainder were sleeping rough in Belgrade’s city centre or at the border with Hungary. UNHCR Serbia estimates that 25 per cent of the former (ca 1,500) are Afghans, while they constitute a majority of the latter (ie at least 700).

Bulgaria

Bulgaria, where a small part of the border with Turkey has not yet been [fenced](#), has become one of the last entry points into the EU from Turkey. But it is not an easy access route. The Politico blog [called](#) the country “Europe’s most hostile port of entry.”

By November 2016, Bulgaria [reportedly](#) had 13,000 migrants within its territory, “most of them Afghans.” There is a growing number of reports about sub-standard government facilities for them as well as about maltreatment by security forces. [Human Rights Watch](#), [Oxfam](#) and other organisations have reported how Bulgarian law enforcement officials subject asylum seekers to violence at the Turkish, Romanian and Serbian borders; refugees regularly report beatings and dog bites, having their money and personal belongings stolen and a “lack of adequate food and unsanitary conditions” in detention facilities. A number of migrants AAN encountered in Belgrade in June and November 2016 reported similar incidents (see reports [here](#) and [here](#))

The Bulgarian government, like the [Hungarian government](#), further condones [paramilitary vigilante groups](#), some of them self-employed, others funded by the government, which hunt illegal migrants. These groups even attract activists from other EU countries’ right-wing nationalist [groups](#) and are regularly accused of violence against migrants.

In November, [riots broke out](#) at Bulgaria’s largest camp, Harmanli, near the Turkish and Greek border. It was inhabited, at that point, by 3,000 people, most of them [reportedly](#) Afghan. The place had been beset by anti-immigrant groups, and the authorities had reacted by curbing the migrants’ right of movement. Following the riots, the Bulgarian government took a number of measures to lower the number of migrants. Similarly to Greece, Bulgaria started urging incoming migrants to apply for asylum upon arrival. As a result, applications increased by 82 per cent from the second to the third quarters of 2016, to an absolute figure of 6,365 – almost half of the new applicants (3,145) coming from [Afghanistan](#). It also started pushing for a bilateral readmission agreement with Afghanistan that would allow it to send back rejected [asylum seekers](#). According to media reports, Bulgaria cooperates closely with Turkey: Turkey takes back refugees who pass the bilateral border illegally, are picked up on the Bulgarian side and immediately returned. It is unclear which refugees are allowed in to request asylum and which are immediately returned.



Romania

EU member-country Romania did not play much of a role as a transit country, as long as the Balkan route was open. Reaching Romania via Bulgaria would require crossing the River Danube. Throughout 2015, 96 Afghans filed an asylum application there, out of a total of 1267 applicants (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Figures dropped even further in 2016, with only ten Afghans applying in each of the first and the second quarters, and 30 in the third quarter of 2016.

Romania could potentially become part of a secondary route, due to the daily changes in the movement strategies in the Balkan countries, as it has not yet closed its borders. Romania – in line with Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – voted against compulsory EU reception quotas for asylum seekers in September 2015 (see [here](#) for political background). On a national level, however, measures were taken to raise the capacity on the border and to offer basic supplies as well as medical and humanitarian aid, in case more migrants started coming.

Croatia

Croatia was a major transit country along the Balkan corridor, but has become relative quiet again following its closure. There is some permeability at the border between Serbia and Croatia (see AAN reporting [here](#)), but only a small number of Afghans applied for asylum in Croatia in 2015. Of the six who did so in 2015, four were rejected, one was give refugee status, and one case seems to be [pending](#). In 2016, the number of applications rose to 370 (first to third quarter).

The central divide: Austria and Hungary

Austria and Hungary constitute a divide between the south and the north, but at the same time the Balkan route extends into both countries. Both countries were among the top receivers in 2015 and were still processing large numbers of that year's asylum seekers in 2016. Hungary adopted a very harsh attitude to prevent new arrivals from coming in, while Austria took a comparatively more moderate stance (more detail on legal changes in part 1: [here](#)). Germany also belongs in this group (more detail in the case study in part 3).

Austria

In 2015, Austria received the fourth-highest number of asylum applicants (88,900) from all countries of origin (see [here](#)), following Germany, Sweden and Hungary. In 2016, although numbers of all asylum seekers – including Afghans – dropped, it remained the fifth largest recipient country, and the second largest for Afghans in terms of new asylum requests. It was unclear how many of these large numbers of individuals ended up staying in the country; in 2015, half of all migrants entering Austria subsequently left the country again, according to official government [figures](#).

Numbers of Afghan asylum applicants went down by more than half, from 24,480 in 2015



(among them 4,000 unaccompanied minors in the first half of the year [alone](#)) to 11,289 by the end of November 2016. The number of unaccompanied minors dropped particularly sharply, to [287](#). Afghans – of whom there is a 35,000-strong community in Austria – are relatively well integrated. 3,800 of them (11 per cent) had a taxable job, ie one not in the low-wage sector, in [mid-2016](#).

Hungary

Hungary, in 2015, received a total of 174,400 asylum applications – the second-most of any European country – of which 45,600 came from Afghanistan. Most of those who had entered Hungary in 2015 never intended to stay, transiting Hungary on their way to Western Europe, without ever registering.

In 2016, Hungary dropped out of Europe's top ten, receiving 28,803 asylum applications, 38 per cent of them from Afghans (almost 11,000) (source: [here](#)). This decrease was largely a result of Hungary's decision to fence its entire southern borders (with Serbia and Croatia) to implement toughened laws that, in essence, violate EU legislation. In July 2016, a new law came into force that allows the Hungarian police to automatically 'push back' anyone who is caught within eight kilometres of the border – without registering their data or allowing them to submit an asylum claim. In early 2017, the government introduced mandatory detention for all migrants that begin the asylum procedure.

Of the 2015 applicants, only 146 were granted asylum, according to government statistics quoted in this [report](#). Another 362 were permitted to stay, but unlike recognised asylum seekers, they do not receive state subsidies. The comparatively low number of asylum applicants given by Hungary is very likely limited to those who managed to enter illegally, were caught and then asked for asylum.

With the border closed on the Serbian side, Hungary has still allowed a small 'opening' through which migrants can enter to apply for asylum – but in very limited numbers and under extremely harsh conditions. Since October 2016, a decreasing number of migrants – currently 20 migrants per working day (a maximum of 100 per week, down from originally around 700 per week) – are allowed to register an asylum request at the Horgoš and Kelebija border crossings. The process prioritises families with children and unaccompanied women, as they have the greatest chance of success, while largely overlooking single men (who constitute the majority of Afghans in Serbia). The number of overall asylum cases registered in Hungary amounted to 1,610 cases in the third quarter of 2016, dropping significantly from the first (6,830) and second quarters (14,915).

These asylum claims at the border can, according to Human Rights Watch, be dismissed under Hungarian law without any consideration of the merits of the case, and often are, within the space of a single day, since Hungary has declared Serbia a safe third country – so far, the only EU country to do so. In early 2017, reports emerged that migrants were being kept in the 'no-man's land' right next to its fence in freezing [temperatures](#).



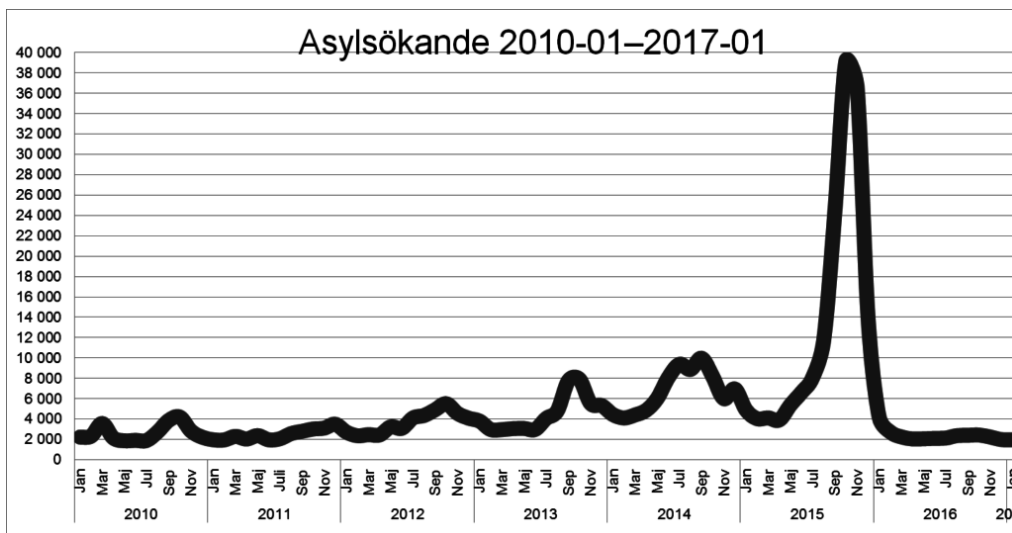
Afghans in selected 'northern' EU countries

After the closure of the Balkan route and the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal in early 2016, the number of asylum seekers – and Afghan among them – dropped significantly in the EU countries north of the Alps. This includes the three Nordic EU member-countries, the three Benelux countries and Austria, all of which had registered particularly high numbers in 2015, as large numbers of migrants were ferried through the Balkans and into the EU.

In the northern and some north-western EU countries, the numbers of Afghan asylum seekers dropped significantly between the fourth quarter of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016. This seems to have been a result of both border controls reinstated in late 2015 (while further south, mainly in Germany and Austria, migrants continued to arrive in large numbers) and, possibly, a more speedy registration process than in 2015. Between 2015 and 2016, numbers in Finland decreased by 89 per cent, from 4,300 to 490; in the Netherlands by 69 per cent, from 1,950 to 600; in Denmark by 58 per cent, from 1,680 to 620; and in non-EU Norway by 97 per cent, from 4,905 to 150. Over the second and third quarters, these figures dropped even further: in Finland to 60 and 80; in Norway to 80 and 85; in Denmark to 280 and 130; in the Netherlands to 170 (third quarter figures were not available, as Afghanistan was not in the top-five countries of origin anymore). The same was true in Sweden, although on a higher level, where numbers dropped by over 90 per cent, from over 41,500 in total in 2015 to 2,969 in 2016.

Sweden

Sweden closed its borders and tightened its asylum laws in general leading to a general drop in asylum applications, including from Afghans. The 2016 figure of Afghan asylum seekers was closer again to the 2014 level when 3,104 Afghans lodged such an application. The January 2017 this figure was at 193 applications, suggesting that the 2016 level has stabilised. In the peak year of 2015, Sweden had a particularly high number of Afghan minors who applied for asylum. These 23,480 cases represented more than half of all Afghan cases (see earlier AAN analysis [here](#)). This figure [dropped](#) to 665 in 2016.





Asylum seekers in Sweden from 2010 to 2017

Between January and October 2016, in 44 per cent of Afghan asylum cases, residency permits were granted. For January 2017 (with 669 cases decided) this rate was almost [unchanged](#) at 45 per cent. In the same months, the acceptance rate for minors was at 82 per cent (with 191 cases, Afghanistan representing almost half of all 439 asylum cases of minors). By 1 February 2017, the country had altogether 36,895 Afghans living in the reception centres of the migration authorities, among them 17,195 unaccompanied minors. (Find a table showing the number of Afghan asylum applicants in the country between 2000 and 2015: [here](#))

A reassessment by the Swedish government of the security situation in Afghanistan (in the form of a directive from the migration authority, see [here](#)), however, concluded that security had deteriorated overall, but that the conflict affected different parts of the country and different population groups in different ways. At the same time, the Swedish public perception about and compassion with Afghans in Sweden has deteriorated due to the involvement of Afghan asylum seekers in some highly publicised crimes, including battering and sexual offences (media reports [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

For some in the particular group of unaccompanied minors, the government brought improvements on the way in 2016. It suggested that the minors whose asylum applications had been rejected and who would be deported when they reached 18 years of age, could stay to finish their secondary schooling (see [here](#)). They would also be granted residency if they had been able to find employment. By the end of November 2016, around 1,600 asylum applications by minors were approved, while around 500 were rejected. The government's suggestion would only apply to those who were already in secondary school. The suggestion needs parliamentary approval. By the end of November 2016, around 1,600 asylum applications by Afghan minors were approved, while around 500 were rejected. This indicates a substantive backlog of such cases that still need to be processed.

The tighter asylum laws in general, together with increasing tendency by the asylum authorities to carry out age reviews resulting in 'minors' being re-defined as 'adults' and thereby eligible for deportation, has put increasing pressure on young, Afghan [asylum seekers](#). The fact that some of the Afghans resided in Iran before attempting to seek asylum in Sweden, but will be deported to Afghanistan if their asylum claims are rejected adds to the [pressure](#). Groups working with asylum seekers, including the non-profit organisation Ensamkommandes förbund and the network of Vi står inte ut have warned against depression, suicide attempts and suicides among especially young, Afghan male asylum seekers. Reuters reported about one case of a young Afghan already last year. In April 2016, Mustafa Ansari committed suicide in the centre for young asylum-seekers in the southern Swedish village of Svangsta. The report



said: “Ansari, who had no papers [...] was described in the autopsy as 17” and that “he was suffering from depression and bipolar disorder. Friends say he desperately missed his family. He waited months for a meeting to process his claim, but the agency cancelled one meeting and messed up the venue for the other” (see [here](#)). Later in 2016, one of the main Swedish newspapers, Dagens Nyheter reported that close to 40 per cent of the unaccompanied minors (many of whom are Afghans) seeking psychiatric support with health services in Stockholm had suicidal [thoughts](#). Reuters [quoted](#) Swedish migration agency records that showed asylum-seekers threatened or attempted suicide at least 500 times between January 2014 and end-August 2016.

The trend has continued in 2017. Ahmad Zaki Khalil, an Afghan working with asylum seekers in Sweden told the BBC’s [Farsi service](#) on 8 February 2017 that the three last suicides happened in January, and on 4 and 7 February. He was quoted as saying that he believed the lack of papers that proof they were minors might have been the reason for the three youth’s suicides. On 9 February 2017 the website Norway Today [quoted](#) Mahboba Madadi from Ensamkommandes forbund as saying that “in recent weeks, seven people attempted to commit suicide and three of them succeeded. They were all from Afghanistan, all boys [...]. The migrants were all under 18 and were at different housing centres across Sweden. Khalil was quoted as saying he believed that the lack of papers proving their status as minors may have be the reason for the recent suicide attempts. In early February, the Swedish mainstream daily Göteborgs-Posten (one report [here](#)) raised an alarm that the suicides were not only planned individually, but that “group suicides” among “refugee children” were planned over social media.

Netherlands

The Netherlands had a relatively low number of Afghan asylum seekers. During 2015, a total of 2,680 Afghans requested asylum (6.0% of all 45,035 cases) according to government [figures](#). This number includes first-time asylum requests (2,550), repeated requests (310) and requests for family reunification (85). In 2016, until 30 November, the total number of asylum requests had dropped by more than half, to 18,695, while Afghan cases decreased slightly less by percentage – to 1,345 (7.2%). Of these, 1,010 were first requests, 335 were repeated requests and 50 were family reunifications. Afghan asylum seekers were, for a brief while, in the Dutch top three countries of origin in the first quarter 2016 (with 600 applicants), whereas they were not even among the top five throughout 2015.

With around 44,000 people, the Netherlands hosts one of the largest Afghan communities in Europe. There are 33,058 (76%) first generation arrivals, while 10,674 (24%) are second generation, meaning they were born in the Netherlands (this figure is from 1 January 2015). The Netherlands (together with Germany) hosts a relatively high proportion of the PDPA elite, many of whom left Afghanistan in the 1990s. Due to a strict implementation of article 1F of the [Refugee Charter](#), all Afghans who worked for KhAD, the intelligence service under the communist government, or who are otherwise suspected of having been part of a chain of command responsible for torture, have been blocked from receiving asylum. The Dutch



government has, over the years, tried to deport several of these Afghans. There have been several cases of trials for alleged war crimes (see AAN analysis [here](#)).

The Netherlands has a specific policy in place for 'westernised girls' who come from countries like Afghanistan: girls over ten years of age, who have not been given a protection status but who have spent at least the last eight years in the country and who are now so westernised they would face problems if returned, can be allowed to stay, together with their families (this is, however, not a given rule; decisions are taken on a case-by-case basis). This policy came into being in 2011, after an upheaval over the intended deportation of a teenage Afghan girl. The Dutch minister responsible for asylum policies estimated in April 2011 that, at the time, there were around 400 girls who might match this criteria.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom remained relatively untouched by the massive 2015/16 influx of migrants, due to its geographical position and to earlier efforts to deter migrants (made after peak numbers of asylum applications, circa 84,000, in 2002, see [here](#)). However, for many refugees, the UK was their destination of choice. Thousands of them gathered at the mainland entrance to the Eurotunnel, near the French city of Calais, seeking to illegally board lorries and trains ([here](#) a media report where this resulted in an Afghan fatality). This included many Afghans, among whom a proportionally large number were minors. In October 2016, the UK took in 750 children, including many Afghans, from an unofficial camp near Calais known as the 'Jungle' when it was closed by French police amidst violent [protests](#). This was highly unusual. The UK normally only accepts claims for asylum from people who have reached Britain.

Between January and September 2016, the UK had registered the highest number of asylum applications of all nationalities in the first three-quarters of a year since 2004, with a total of 33,960. This is a reflection of the Europe-wide developments since 2015. Although relatively few migrants reached Britain compared with other countries, there was still a noticeable boost in UK numbers. In the fourth quarter of 2016, this trend ceased, though, with numbers lower by more 25 per cent compared to the second quarter of the year (from 10,231 to 7,146).

Those seeking asylum in the UK are encouraged to make a claim as soon as they arrive. Decisions usually should take a matter of [weeks](#). While waiting for an asylum decision, there is no automatic state support. Those whose bids are successful are given 'refugee status' or, if the application is on human rights grounds, 'humanitarian protection': they have the right to work and claim state benefits as well as to seek family reunion (not available for under 18 year-olds). After five years, if it is still considered unsafe for applicants to return to their country of origin, they can apply for 'Indefinite Leave to Remain' in the UK.

Those whose claims are rejected can appeal in a hearing before an immigration judge. If that is rejected, they can usually only make a second appeal if they can present fresh evidence. If a claim is rejected, people are expected to make arrangements to leave the country, or they may be forcibly deported.



The number of Afghans among asylum seekers in 2016 was low compared to other countries, with 2,567 applications, around 7.5 per cent of all applications, but this still made them the fourth largest group (they had ranked only sixth a year earlier, in September 2015). Among unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children, however, as in Sweden, Afghans represented the largest national group, with 783 cases registered by September 2016 (circa 25 per cent), out of a total of 3,144. Many, perhaps most of those had come from the 'Jungle' in Calais.

France

France is also an outlier in the trend in 2016, as the number of asylum applicants did not drop as in most other European countries. Throughout the year, it had constantly had the third-highest number of overall asylum applications per month between 6,120 and 7,655. As a result of Europe-wide events, Afghanistan was back in the top ten of France's main countries of origin in 2015 (ranked at number ten) with 2,122 registered Afghan "requests for international protection" in total; the protection rate was high, with 80.3 per cent. In 2014, Afghanistan was still on rank 31, with only 472 Afghans claiming protection (see [here](#), pp 6, 37, 42, 54). In 2015, Afghanistan also was the most important country of origin for asylum seeking minors (14.6%) for France.

In its 2015 annual report, the French asylum authority OFPRA accredited the increase in asylum applications from Afghans also to the influx into the Calais 'Jungle' and Paris. When these camps were shut down in 2016, those inmates not allowed in by the UK were forced to apply for asylum in France. Also, as AAN heard in Italy, many Afghans prefer France over Italy as a destination, also due to relatively high recognition rates for Afghans. This contributed to the increase of Afghans applying for asylum. Their figure by the end of the third quarter in 2016, 4,455, already surpassed the 2015 total. According to IOM figures, 118 Afghan asylum seekers returned voluntarily to their country from France in 2016 (2015: 9), and there were no forced returns from France since 2009.

A brief outlook

With numbers of incoming migrants having dropped significantly, many European countries have speeded up the processing of the large backlog of asylum requests (1.2 million in total), while requiring those still not registered to do so. It can be expected, therefore, that the overall number of rejected asylum seekers will continue to grow. Although all applicants have the right to appeal, which, if exercised, would extend the duration of their stay considerably, also the number of Afghans with a last instance rejection will grow; as a result, the numbers of returns – voluntary or not – is likely to grow throughout 2017.

For those stuck between closed borders in southern and south-eastern Europe it has become almost impossible to reach their favoured destinations north of the Alps, mainly Germany, northern countries or the UK. If the EU remains unable to agree on a distribution quota for all countries, and with the Dublin regulation increasingly being applied again, the danger of so-called 'chain deportation' arises once again. If some countries chose to deport asylum seekers



across outer EU borders (as Hungary does in the case of Serbia), they might once again end up in the country they had tried to flee from. The German Institute for Human Rights had already warned this might happen in a position [paper](#) published after the EU-Turkey deal was concluded – not only for Syrians (pushed back by Turkey to Syria), but also explicitly for Afghans (working translation by AAN):

For non-Syrian asylum seekers, who, for example, had fled from Afghanistan or Iraq, there also is the danger that they might be deported from Turkey back to their countries of origin, in breach of the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Human Rights Convention.

Italy and Greece, both in economic crisis, will continue to have to carry the biggest share of the burden of accommodating asylum seekers. This might further strain their social systems and possibly result in a negative change of attitude among larger parts of the population vis-à-vis the migrants, with comparatively small but vocal xenophobic movements already active.

(1) An AAN [dispatch](#) by guest author Noah Arjomand in September 2016 pointed to UNHCR statistics according to which there were 3,109 Afghan refugees and 107,655 Afghan asylum seekers in Turkey at the end of July 2016. A July 2016 report by Amnesty International (AI) [report](#) said that “Turkey hosts more than 400,000 non-Syrian refugees“ while a European Parliament [document](#) from December 2016 estimated that 40 per cent of non-Syrian refugees in Turkey were Afghans. Putting these two figure together, that would bring the number of Afghans in Turkey to over 160,000.

(2) Eurostat only publishes the top three countries of origin for each EU member-state per quarter. There, Afghanistan was in the top three for Greece only in the third quarter (with 670 applications); in the first and second quarter, Afghanistan had less than 480 resp. 620 applications.

(3) One unlucky Afghan asylum seeker was killed in the summer 2016 earthquake in Amatrice, in central [Italy](#).

(4) In Italy, there is no uniform reception system. Governmental first reception centres can be managed by public local entities, consortia of municipalities and other public or private bodies specialised in the assistance of asylum applicants (more detail [here](#)).

(5) This term refers to asylum seekers in the EU who, according to a EU regulation, can be sent back to their first EU country of entry (if registered there) in case they apply for asylum elsewhere. This regulation was adopted in Dublin in 2003 (see more [here](#)).



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