



CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN MIGRATION FLOWS TO EUROPE

The civil war in Syria in its ninth year has forced 13 million Syrians forced to leave their homes. Among them 6 million of them relocated within the country and 5,5 million seek refuge abroad. Turkey with its open door policy has received 3,58 million Syrians up until now. In addition to that 1,1 million of them reached to Europe through illegal ways. At first Syrian refugees used Turkey-Greece route and later on Libya-Italy or Central Mediterranean route and Strait of Gibraltar to reach Spain. During this migration flow in addition to Syrians fleeing from the civil war, labor migrants and those who fled economic difficulties in their own countries were able to join the migration flow in larger numbers. While the majority of people using the Turkey-Greece route are Syrians, the vast majority of people using the Central Mediterranean route are migrants from various Asian and African countries. This shows that the structure of the migration influx has changed and turned into a sustainable illegal immigrant business structure. Since the second half of 2017, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord has been countering people-smuggling operations in the Sabratha region, the major hub for such illegal activities, which has led to an increase in the number of transits from the Strait of Gibraltar to Spain in 2018.

Looking at the developments of 2019, we see that the main migration route returned back to Eastern Mediterranean route. Although the total number of people entering Europe by illegal means decreased by 13% to 128,536 people compared to 2018, the number of people using Greece as an entry point increased by 42% to 71,386 people compared to 2018. In terms of periods, the most activity was observed in the second half of 2019, while the most frequent entry points were the islands of Lesbos, Kos, and Samos. If we look at the countries from which irregular migrants came from, for example, in the fourth quarter of 2019, Afghanistan took first place with 28,328 people, followed by Syria with 18,520 people. In line with this information, the main reason for irregular migrants to use

Greece again as an entry point is the stricter control of exit points of other route.

Another interesting development in 2019 was the increased role of Western Balkan countries in illegal border crossings. The number of irregular migrants registered in 2019 reached 29,537 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Croatia with 19,683, Serbia with 17,611, and Slovenia with 14,300. The greatest increase in the number of registered irregular migrants compared to the 2018 figures was observed in Slovenia with 59%, followed by Serbia with 50%. Based on these figures, it is seen that irregular migrants increasingly use the Bosnia and Herzegovina-Slovenia route in their attempt to reach other European countries. In this light, we can say that a new route has started to form in the Western Balkans. Another important recent development regarding migration flow to Europe is Turkey's decision to stop preventing illegal border crossings as of February 28, 2020. After this decision, thousands of immigrants flocked to the Pazarkule border gate and the Meric river shores. At that point, there were disagreements and difficulties regarding the fulfillment of the terms of the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement. According to the agreement, the EU was committed to providing Turkey a total of €6 billion in financial assistance to be used for humanitarian support of Syrian refugees. However, only €2.7 billion of the amount promised have so far been transferred through various projects, in addition to that €4.3 billion will be sent until 2025 under the contracts to be made. From the beginning of the migration wave until 2019, Turkey spent about \$40 billion of its own resources to meet the humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees. In this regard, since 2016, the Turkish side has been continuously calling on the EU to fulfill its obligations, including the financial support conditions of the agreement. Similarly, the efforts regarding other issues of the agreement such as the refugee exchange process and Turkey's inclusion in the Schengen Area did not evolve as expected. As for border security,

Turkey fulfilled its commitment until February 28, 2020, and managed to reduce significantly illegal crossings by increasing border controls.

Currently, with the increased crossings into Greece and Turkey's decision to stop preventing flow of irregular migrants, the number of people flocking to the border points and the course of this process have raised concerns. According to Defense Minister of Turkey Hulusi Akar, about 149,000 people passed to Greece from Turkey in March 2020. In the UNHCR's weekly reports on Greece, it is reported that 1,462 people were registered on March 2-April 5, 2020, 865 of whom reached Greece between March 2-8. According to the UN, at least 20,000 people were waiting in the borderline in mid-March 2020, and it is quite difficult to keep an eye on the figures due to the high mobility at the border.

It is noteworthy that the spread of coronavirus since it emerged in China at the end of December 2019 has also influenced the migration flow between Turkey and Greece. As of the end of March 2020, the number of people trying to cross into Greece decreased due to the measures taken in both countries to prevent the spread of the disease. It remains to be seen how this issue will develop after the coronavirus outbreak is over.

In summary, at the beginning of 2020, there was an increasing trend in the number of people trying to reach Europe illegally, and the reasons for this may be the revival of Greece as an entry point. The constant control on the Libya-Italy route and the difficulties related to the use of the Strait of Gibraltar contribute to turning Greece into the main migration route again. Nevertheless, the Bosnia and Herzegovina-Slovenia route formed in the Balkans should also be closely monitored throughout the year. The coronavirus pandemic halting life in almost all parts of the world will continue to be a significant issue on the agenda. Moreover, the pandemic is likely to shape the migration flow between Turkey and Greece, as well as the EU-Turkey negotiations on this matter.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release regarding the so-called presidential and parliamentary elections in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Turkey's diplomatic agency called the illegal elections "a manifestation of the efforts to unilaterally legitimize the current situation" in the Armenia-occupied territories and "a flagrant violation of international law" that undermines the efforts towards a peaceful and lasting resolution of the conflict (MFA of Turkey, 30.03.2020).
- President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev issued a decree announcing a draft of reservists to the country's territorial forces. Local authorities will be responsible for organizing the draft in coordination with the General Staff of the Armed Forces. Reservists will participate in ensuring the state of emergency and the quarantine regime introduced in connection with the coronavirus pandemic, as well as in eliminating consequences of possible natural or man-made disasters (Akorda, 02.04.2020).
- In a televised speech, President of Russia Vladimir Putin extended a paid non-working period across Russia until April 30, 2020 as a measure to slow down the spread of coronavirus. According to Putin, the heads of Russian regions, in many of which a partial lockdown was already introduced, will receive extra powers to take additional measures for ensuring people's safety and economic stability. The Russian leader noted that restrictions could be lifted earlier if the situation improved (President of Russia, 02.04.2020).
- During an emergency session that was boycotted by opposition members, the Armenian parliament approved a law presented by the Ministry of Justice that would allow the government to collect cell phone users' data including the location, the numbers they called and when the calls were made. Armenia's authorities regard the tracking of infected persons' whereabouts and contacts through their telephones as a measure to stem the spread of coronavirus (Eurasianet, 31.03.2020).
- The working group under the constitutional commission on the development of amendments to the constitution held its regular meeting at the Mejlis, Turkmenistan's parliament. The working group consisting of parliamentarians, officials, experts, and representatives of public associations reviewed the proposals and comments received from citizens, political parties, enterprises, organizations, and local authorities. In particular, the amendments provide for the creation of a bicameral legislative body (Turkmenistan Today, 01.04.2020).
- The Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs blocked a drug smuggling channel from Afghanistan to the CIS states by arresting seven members of an organized criminal group in possession of 70 kg of drugs. The preliminary investigation established that the criminals coordinated their actions through the WhatsApp, Iqo and Viber instant messengers. Their correspondence allowed police officers to reveal connections of the group with smugglers in other countries (Khovar, 02.04.2020).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- In the light of the coronavirus pandemic and the fall in global oil prices, the government of Kazakhstan revised its GDP projections for 2020 from a 4% growth to a 0.9% contraction. According to the current forecast, exports will drop by \$16.3 billion to \$35.1 billion, while imports will decline by \$7.5 billion to \$26.6 billion. Expected nominal GDP is estimated at 69.7 trillion tenge (\$155 billion), which is 4.8 trillion tenge (\$10.6 billion) less than previously anticipated (Eurasianet, 02.04.2020).
- Due to the imposed state of emergency, the government of Kazakhstan developed special measures to support small and medium enterprises through the Business Roadmap 2025 and Economy of Simple Things programs. In particular, loan rates were capped at 6%, restrictions for participation in the programs were removed, and the maximum amount of credit support per entrepreneur was increased to 7 billion tenge, or about \$15.6 million (Kazakh TV, 03.04.2020).
- To address the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, the World Bank's Board of Directors approved an initial global emergency response package of nearly \$2 billion for 25 countries worldwide. The list includes Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that will receive \$12.15 and \$11.3 million, respectively. Kyrgyzstan will receive additional \$9 million to procure 20 fully equipped ambulances, equipment for rapid response teams, and personal protection equipment for frontline medical staff (AKIpress, 03.04.2020).
- President of Moldova Igor Dodon voiced a number of initiatives to support the population and the economy during the coronavirus crisis. In particular, the government will return 60% to 100% of personal income taxes, social taxes and health insurance fees to those enterprises that have suspended work. In addition, persons who have lost their jobs will be paid 60% to 80% of the salary from the last job (Moldpres, 30.03.2020).
- Azerbaijani companies will receive financial support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) under the emergency "solidarity package" of €1 billion for the bank's existing clients in 38 countries. The EBRD's support includes measures such as emergency liquidity, working capital, and trade finance. As an important institutional investor in Azerbaijan, to date, the EBRD has invested €3.3 billion in over 170 projects in the country (News.Az, 03.04.2020).
- The European Commission decided to allocate €840 million to the Eastern Partnership countries including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine as part of its global response to the coronavirus outbreak. €140 million will be directed at immediate needs of the partner states in combating the disease, while the remaining €700 million will be spent on mitigating the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic (BeITA, 30.03.2020).

Society and Culture

- According to a survey conducted by the sociological service of the Anti-Corruption Fund, 47% of Russians would support the constitutional amendments removing term limits for President Putin, and 41% of respondents do not support the incumbent president's perpetual rule. The share of Russians supporting the amendments decreased from 67% in February 2020 to 56% a month later, while the percentage of opponents increased from 18% to 28% (Vedomosti, 01.04.2020).
- Tajikistan requested Russia and other countries, as well as international organizations, to provide assistance in the prevention of the COVID-19 disease. According to the diplomatic note sent by the Tajik side, the country needs masks, special gowns, gloves, and protective overalls for medical staff, as well as tests to determine coronavirus. The World Health Organization confirmed the absence of the infection in the country, but asked the population to maintain hygiene and refrain from visiting crowded places (RIA Novosti, 03.04.2020).
- At the instruction of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the Uzbek government provided humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan to assist in the eradication of coronavirus. The cargo sent by rail from the Kurgantepa district of Uzbekistan's Andijan region included 1,000 tons of flour, various food products, disposable protective overalls, respirators, gloves, safety glasses, pyrometers and test systems (Kabar, 02.04.2020).
- The Embassy of Kazakhstan in Armenia released an electronic version of the "Anthology of Kazakh Literature" in the Armenian language, the paper version of which was published in the end of 2019. The anthology consists of translations of more than 100 works of Kazakh literature classics from the 16th to the 21st centuries such as Abay, Shakarim, Magzhan Zhumabaev, Ilyas Zhansugurov, Zhambyl Zhabayev and many others. The collection also includes research articles and literary reviews (Kazinform, 01.04.2020).
- Two museums of Kazakhstan entered the top five of the best CIS museums of history and culture prepared by the TurStat portal. The National Museum in Nur-Sultan and the Central State Museum in Almaty ranked third and fifth, respectively. The ranking analyzed the popularity of museums and their proposed virtual tours. The State Historical Museum in Moscow topped the list (TurStat, 03.04.2020).
- The Development Strategy Center, a think tank based in Uzbekistan, presented a draft law on reforming the system of registration of citizens at their place of residence, or the so-called "propiska". If the proposed law is approved, the old system will be replaced by registration at a permanent or temporary address. President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev voiced the idea during an address to the parliament in January 2020, noting the need to introduce a new legislative framework that takes into account international experience, human rights, and opinions of citizens (Fergana, 05.04.2020).