With some borders shared with EU countries that are trying to keep migrants and asylum seekers out, Serbia finds itself increasingly home to people who want to travel onwards but are unable to do so. An estimated eight to ten thousand migrants – most of them Afghans – who intended to travel on to Western Europe are now stuck in Serbia, with more still trickling in. AAN’s Jelena Bjelica and Martine van Bijlert visited the country’s southern and eastern borders, where they found the old smuggling routes through the Balkans still very much alive. They also looked at the country’s northern and western borders and at how migrants and their smugglers are trying to deal with the EU’s efforts to seal off all entry points.

This research on Afghan migration to Europe was supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

Between 2015 and 2017, the movement of people through the Balkans changed significantly. In 2015 and early 2016, an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 people passed each day through what was then called the Balkan ‘humanitarian corridor.’ The corridor first stretched from Greece to Serbia, from where people were ferried on by the Serbian authorities, to its borders with EU member countries. In September 2015, after Hungary fenced off its border (see previous AAN reporting here and Map 1 below), the flow of people was redirected to Serbia’s northwestern
border with Croatia. By March 2016 the Balkan corridor was closed. In February 2016 Croatia closed its border and on 20 March 2016, a deal between the EU and the government in Ankara, that aimed to stop the flow of people from Turkey, came into force. Although people continued to arrive in Serbia, brought by smugglers and their facilitators, the flow out of the country was greatly diminished.

As a result, the number of migrants in Serbia increased almost fourfold throughout 2016, from 2,000 in March to 7,550 in December, according to figures provided by the European Commission. The increase was mainly due to the continued flow from Bulgaria and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, despite increased Serbian border controls from July 2016 onwards (Serbia claims to have, since then, prevented the irregular entry of 21,000 people.) The outflow of people to the north and the west diminished as strict Hungarian legal restrictions that came into force in mid-2016 (see previous AAN reporting here) and again, more recently, in early 2017. Estimates vary, but there are probably currently between 8-10,000 migrants stuck in Serbia, most of whom still wish to travel onwards. (1)

Map 1: The Balkan humanitarian corridor, November 2015 to February 2016. Credit: Free map downloaded from d-maps.com, arrows added by AAN.
AAN visited Serbia’s southern and southeastern borders, which are the two main borders from where migrants try to enter Serbia: from Macedonia in the south and Bulgaria in the east (see Map 2 below.) We also spoke to aid workers and volunteers who work at the ‘outbound’ borders, from where migrants try to leave Serbia to get into Hungary to the north, Croatia to the northwest and Romania to the northeast.

Map 2: Migration routes in the Balkans, 2017. Credit: Free map downloaded from d-maps.com, arrows added by AAN.

The southern border with Macedonia

The 62 kilometre-long border between Serbia and Macedonia has two officials crossings:
Preševo and Prohor P?injski. The Preševo border crossing played an important role in the Balkan humanitarian corridor (see earlier AAN analysis.) The authorities established a large transit centre here (which is now a reception centre for migrants and asylum seekers staying in Serbia.) The "green" border between the two countries – the areas without official border crossings – is hilly and much of it is wooded. Villages that used to be in the same country – Yugoslavia – are still connected by small roads. The western part of the green border is inhabited by ethnic Albanians, a minority with deep grudges against the Slav majority in both Serbia and Macedonia. They have kept the hidden smuggling pathways through the surrounding hills and woods alive, both in practice and in the local knowledge. (2)

In April 2017 AAN visited two villages in Macedonia famous for smuggling: Vaksince and Lojane. Lojane in particular, which is in the Lipkovo municipality, is well located and well connected, with many paths leading to the Serbian village of Miratovac in the Preševo municipality (the two villages are only a few kilometres apart) and many families having members on both sides of the border. The villages swiftly opted for catering to the influx of refugees and migrants. In February 2016 German broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) reported on the involvement of the villagers in Lojane, who were said to rent out rooms and barns (a room for around 10 euros per night, or a place in a barn going for half that price.) AAN was told that people in transit could also sometimes stay in the local mosque or in ‘wild camps’ in the surrounding hills – in caves, abandoned buildings or the open air.

AAN visited the office of the Macedonian NGO Legis in Lojane village, which documents and supports migrants in transit, whether they are arriving from elsewhere in Macedonia and getting ready to cross into Serbia, or being pushed back from Serbia by the authorities there. Legis offers basic support such as blankets, clothes and (baby) food, and documents the migrants they encounter in an attempt to keep track of the flow of people and of how they are treated. They register three categories in their database: migrants travelling towards Serbia, migrants who have been kept out of Serbia (within days of entry and without having reached a reception centre or town) and migrants who have been ‘expelled’ (after they entered deeper into Serbia, reached a camp where they were registered, or stayed three or more days in the country).

In the seven-month period after it began its registration (25 August 2016 to 31 March 2017), Legis registered a total of 3,911 refugees/migrants in transit through the Lipkovo municipality. Of this number, 1,041 – or 26 per cent – were Afghan. The figures, which represent only the people Legis encountered (not the total number of people on the move), are shown in Table 1 below.

Not all those who were registered as being on an onward journey into Serbia represented new arrivals from Greece, as many had been pushed back from Serbia earlier and were now trying to re-enter. A Legis staff member explained that many people try to enter Serbia many times: “We registered a case of one Afghan family … that was pushed back from Serbia [four] times. We first registered the family in December [2016] when they were on their way to Serbia. Then we saw them again in January [2017], after they had been pushed back. A month later they again reappeared in Lojane. And now our volunteer saw them again a couple of days ago [in
late April 2017]."

When AAN visited the other well-known Macedonian smuggling village, Vaksince, a couple of kilometres to the south of Lojane, we met a Pakistani man in a local café. He told us he was travelling in a group of five (three Pakistanis, one Bangladeshi and a Sri Lankan) and had recently been pushed back from Serbia. The five were staying in caves in the hills above Vaksince and were waiting for a night time opportunity to cross into Serbia again. The local owner of the coffee shop joined in the conversation, explaining how the Pakistani had lost track of his brother earlier while trying to cross the Serbian–Hungarian border (his brother had managed to cross, while the man we spoke to was found and sent back to Serbia. After that, the Serbian police sent him back to Macedonia).

The involvement of the inhabitants of Lojane and Vaksince in smuggling as well as their provision of transport and shelter was highlighted when another local customer walked in and joined in the conversation. He complained that the smugglers would often drop migrants in the middle of nowhere, practically forcing “local youths to give them a ride, simply to be helpful.” And then, he added, the police would harass them and accuse them of helping the smugglers. Later, it turned out the man’s son had been convicted of migrant smuggling and was currently in prison (the sentence for this offence can be up to five years).

Although locals are involved in their immediate environment, the main facilitators and organisers of onward journeys tend to be Afghans or Pakistani. Some of these people are well established
in the local communities and, AAN was told, have been living in the villages for many years and often speak Macedonian or Albanian (see this European Commission case study from 2015 on the smuggling of migrants between Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary.) These Afghan and Pakistani smugglers are apparently so familiar with the region that they can navigate the routes without much help, leaving markings in the woods to guide groups that cross the border during the night. Such markings are well camouflaged to the untrained eye, and often look like rubbish or random pieces of string.

This smuggling network thus stretched all the way from the Albanian villages in Macedonia across Serbia to the north, including a brick factory in the northern town of Subotica. The factory, until recently, used to be a rest stop for migrants hoping to cross into Hungary.

The southern borders with Kosovo and Montenegro

There have been occasional reports of migrants crossing into Serbia from Kosovo and Montenegro – in particular, after the closure of the Balkan humanitarian corridor. However, so far in 2017, the number of people using this route has not been significant.

Both countries, though, could potentially become alternative routes for migrants, if the way through Albania, which lies to the south of both Kosovo and Montenegro, were to reopen for migrant smuggling (see Map 2 above.) In the past, notably during the 1990s, the sea route between Albania and Italy (the narrowest sea point between the two coasts on the Adriatic Sea) was a famous migrant smuggling route, when speedboats carried mainly Albanian migrants to the European Union, ferrying dozens of people across every day. According to local accounts, this route is now mainly used for drug smuggling, such as marihuana, but it is not inconceivable that it could once again be used for smuggling migrants.

The eastern border with Bulgaria

The 318 kilometre-long border between Serbia and Bulgaria is mainly mountainous and very porous. Like the Serbian–Macedonian border, it has a long history of migrant smuggling and human trafficking. In the early 2000s, thousands of Bulgarian women fell victim to (mainly Bulgarian) human traffickers, and were taken to Western Europe. As the networks grew and started to include smaller networks along the route to the European Union, the Bulgarian traffickers also started specialising in smuggling migrants.

According to this 2016 EUPOL study on migrant smuggling in the EU, among European nationals, Bulgarians are the most often identified as migrant smugglers. Although the smugglers usually live in Bulgaria (they may also live in Hungary, Greece, Austria or Italy), they control networks that operate much farther afield: in Germany, Hungary, Switzerland, UK and the Netherlands. According to the EUPOL study, Afghans and Pakistanis are often incorporated into these groups and act as facilitators between their fellow nationals and the local smuggling networks.
Another DW story about Afghan smugglers in Bulgaria offers insights into how this works in practice. It describes how Asif, a 25-year old Afghan, had been recruited by smugglers in Milan who needed a Dari-speaker. Asif’s job was to wait for people in the park in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and direct them to a taxi that would bring them close to the border with Serbia. From that point onwards, the migrants would be guided by a GPS tracking device. Asif also made sure the families in Afghanistan paid the organisation via their local hawalas. (The EUPOL study estimated that in 2015, 20 per cent of the smuggling arrangements into the EU were paid via an alternative banking, ie the hawala system).

Indicators on the number of people entering Serbia from the Bulgarian side varied. According to this blog ‘thousands of people’ left Bulgaria during the first three months of 2017 (the numbers cited for February were, however, much lower than for January, and March was even lower.) The Bulgarian Ministry of Interior reported that in February 2017 (report available here in Bulgarian) the authorities had detained 1,022 migrants on the border with Serbia (on the Bulgarian–Turkish border, only 120 migrants had been apprehended in the same period).

In 2016, Afghans made up over half of the 18,884 migrants that were apprehended by the Bulgarian authorities, with close to 14,000 migrants of all nationalities caught at the Bulgarian-Serbian border (see here and also this Bulgarian Ministry of Interior report from December 2016).

Once migrants have crossed the Bulgarian border into Serbia, local logistical support in terms of transportation to the capital Belgrade is apparently provided by local Serbs. Thus, the journey to the next facilitator, located in Belgrade or to the north, in Subotica, continues.

The northern border with Hungary

As a member of the EU, Hungary has been a primary focus for migrants trying to reach Western Europe through the Balkans (see previous AAN reporting here and here.) Its importance as a main entry point into the EU sharply diminished after it implemented a series of harsh measures aimed at sealing off its border with Serbia. First it built a border fence in September 2015. Then it introduced stricter legal measures in July 2016, which allowed for swifter and more rigorous pushbacks of those who still managed to enter the country (see also the EU's monthly report on migration for December 2016, the section on Hungary, p 77).

The Hungarian fence is located five metres from the actual border inside Hungary, AAN was told. This means that those who are pushed back are technically still on Hungarian soil. Those caught between the fence and the border have thus technically not been expelled, but in practice they have no choice but to return to Serbia.

Organisations that monitor pushbacks from Hungary have noted that these have often been accompanied by acts of violence and humiliation (there have been accusations of beatings, being bitten by dogs, and forced undressing.) (3) This peaked in late 2016 and early 2017, but since then the violence seems to have subsided somewhat.
In March 2017, Hungary further tightened its asylum laws, introducing mandatory detention, which, according to the United Nations, violates EU law. In late April 2017 it erected a second border fence, despite opposition from the UN, human rights groups and a European court ruling (for more background, see here). The second fence, with sensors, alarms and regular patrols, has greatly complicated irregular entry into the country (making it largely dependent on collusion between smugglers and those in charge of border controls).

For those who do manage to enter Hungary, it has become much more difficult to stay, due to the hardening of the country’s asylum laws. Based on a law adopted in June 2016, the police has been authorised to push back ‘irregular migrants’ who are found up to eight kilometres from the border (the so-called ‘Eight Kilometre Law’). On 28 March 2017, Hungary adopted an expanded version of its ‘deeper border control policy’, according to which anyone without papers could be expelled from anywhere in the country – without being given a chance to request asylum. Asylum requests based on the new law are only accepted if they are made in the so-called ‘transit zones’ between Hungary and Serbia by people who, technically, have not been allowed on Hungarian soil yet. (For more details on the new 2017 law, see updates by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee here and here). A summary of the 2016 legislative changes can be found here.

Since June 2016, once the ‘Eight Kilometre Law’ came into force, 19,219 migrants have been prevented from entering Hungary, pushed back to Serbia or escorted back to the border (see this case study by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee). Between January and March of this year, 7,673 people have been registered by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee as being denied entry. Throughout March 2017 as the second layer of fencing was nearing its completion and with the tougher asylum law in place, the number of pushbacks from Hungary has gone down (see the joint InfoPark and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee graph 1 below).
In late May 2017, however, the number of pushbacks drastically increased again, according to figures that InfoPark obtained from the Hungarian police (see graph 2 below). Aid workers in Belgrade believe this increase may well be linked to the mass eviction and relocation in mid-May 2017 of the city’s large squat, where up to a thousand migrants, mainly Afghans and Pakistanis, had been living (for details see here). Although many of its former inhabitants were moved to government-run centres, others may be redoubling their efforts to cross the borders.

Similar evictions and rounding-up of migrants have also taken place along Serbia’s border with Hungary. Since 2015, these areas have accommodated groups of migrants on their way to the north. An abandoned brick factory in Subotica, for instance, has been an important rest stop for migrants on the Balkan route since 2015 (for pictures see here and here). More recently, during the winter months of 2016/2017, single men and unaccompanied minors who had not been admitted or had not wanted to go into the nearby reception centres had been squatting there. Others who had come from other parts of the country stayed here while they waited to join...
groups who were trying to cross the border.

At the beginning of 2017, the number of people in the brick factory apparently swelled, as people tried to cross into Hungary before the amendments in the asylum law came into force. Many facilitators and smugglers moved north as well. Between October 2016 and March 2017, the Serbian police carried out at least five coordinated raids on the brick factory and in nearby woods (for an overview see this report by the Croatian refugee aid organisation Are You Syrious). Following each raid, buses loaded with migrants, and in one instance even a train, took those who had been caught to the Preševo camp on the southern border with Macedonia.

After a recent sell-off of state property, the brick factory was slated for demolition (see this Serbian news report from 1 March 2017, and a sixth raid on the brick factory and nearby woods in April 2017 forcibly evicted the remaining inhabitants from the building. Many were transported to government-run centres or went deeper into the woods to hide. Aid workers in the area told AAN in late April 2017 that only a handful of people were left and that almost no one had been showing up for the regular free lunch distribution organised by international volunteers. It is unclear whether the migrants will return, particularly since the Hungarian border has become so difficult to cross now (see also the other AAN analysis).

The northwest border with Croatia

With the ever-tightening border controls on the Hungarian side, migrants are now setting their sights on Croatia again (for the situation on the Serbian–Croatian border in 2015 and 2016 see previous AAN reporting here and here).

In April 2017, AAN heard from several Afghans who had tried to cross into Croatia that hiding in lorries or under trucks had become a mode of travel (see also this Serbian language report on the apprehension of ten Afghans found in lorry at the border crossing between Serbia and Croatia on 6 March 2017). The migrants’ increasingly desperate attempts to cross into Croatia have only increased since Hungary erected its second fence. This is also indicated by the rise in the number of expulsions from Croatia (often in groups, see UNHCR data for the first week of May 2017 here).

Police attitudes towards migrants have hardened on both sides of the Serbian-Croatian border, and there are now consistent reports of human rights violations at the border. Human Rights Watch, for instance, interviewed ten Afghans, including two unaccompanied children, who described being forced back into Serbia after being apprehended on Croatian territory, without being allowed to lodge asylum claims even though they requested to do so. Nine out of ten said the officers had kicked and punched them, all of them said the officers had taken personal items, including money and mobile phones. In April 2017, the Croatian refugee aid organisation, Are You Syrious, also reported that 72 asylum-seekers had been collectively expelled from Croatia to Serbia, without being granted access to asylum procedures, after having entered Croatia irregularly (see here). The reports sound very similar to earlier descriptions of mistreatment by Bulgarian and Hungarian authorities, indicating how almost all border crossings
have become hazardous.

An Afghan boy having just returned from his latest attempt to cross the Croatian border shows his hands that were injured by thorns and branches during his trek through the forest. Belgrade, April 2017. Photography: Martine van Bijlert

AAN met an Afghan group in the squat in Belgrade in April 2017 who had just returned from the Serbian–Croatian border. They had thorn cuts on their hands from trying to cross through the forest. They said the group consisting of 15 men had been found and beaten by the Serbian police. A man who tried to cross into Croatia with a different group sported a cast on his arm. He had jumped off a lorry to try to avoid detection.

Near the border with Croatia, groups of migrants were squatting, as had been the case at the border with Hungary in the north. According to a volunteer working there, there had been around 100 people gathered close to the town of Šid on the Serbian side, in April 2017. After harsh treatment by the Serbian police, most people had moved to the woods to camp out there. They are now reportedly constantly on the move, apparently even afraid to cook outdoors for fear of attracting attention (see the footnote 3 in this companion dispatch for more details on the situation in Šid).

The northeastern border with Romania

After Hungary sealed its border and toughened its immigrant legislation and police attitudes towards migrants hardened in Croatia, interest shifted to getting into Romania.
The border between Romania and Serbia is 476 kilometres long, 134 of which are marked by the River Danube that goes through the Iron Gates gorge, which is difficult to cross. This border has recently not been used much for illegal migration into the EU, as Romania’s geographical location makes a detour through the eastern fringes of the EU necessary – a route that, moreover, would still lead through Hungary (see also previous AAN reporting here). Nevertheless, the human infrastructure for migrant smuggling is present with robust human trafficking networks to and from Romania, which date back to the 1990s and early 2000s.

Official statistics show an increase in attempted irregular entries from Serbia into Romania since August 2016, although numbers are still relatively low compared to entries into Hungary and Croatia (the highest number of apprehensions by Romanian police – 112 – was reported in December 2016. The number of pushbacks from Romania is also on the increase. According to an international volunteer based in Serbia who recently visited Romania, there are also reports of mistreatment by the Romanian police who are said to be beating and threatening people.

As the least used route until now, it was still unknown territory for the Afghan migrants we spoke to. There were anecdotal stories of people who had recently made it through – one Afghan we spoke to said he had friends who had managed to reach Austria through the Romanian-Hungarian border, while others reported bad treatment by the Romanian police and failed attempts to cross this border. In general, it was clear that the details of the route, and its chances of success were still largely unknown. It is also not clear what the official Romanian response will be.

Still, Romania’s geographical location makes for a longer and more expensive journey. This is not an attractive prospect for most people stuck in Belgrade, who have spent all their money and are exhausted.

Changes in movement patterns and policies

The flow of migrants through Serbia so far in 2017 seems to be close to the levels seen prior to the refugee crisis of 2015/16. New but also more complicated routes are being tested, such as the one described via Romania, but it seems unlikely they will become busy in the same way that routes through Hungary and Croatia have been in the past.

Available statistics show that the number of entries into Serbia from the south and east are still higher than the number of exits to the north and the northwest, meaning that the number of refugees stuck in the country continues to grow. On the one hand, the total number of migrants entering and exiting Serbia is much less than the hundreds of thousands of people who crossed its borders in 2015 and 2016. The change in policies in the region, including harsher border controls or, as in the Hungarian case, the total closure of its border with Serbia, has virtually halted the flow of migrants through Serbia into the EU. But the new measures have left almost 10,000 people stuck there, wondering what to do (for more details, see this companion dispatch).
(1) Official estimates of the number of migrants in Serbia vary. UNHCR, according to a report in early May 2017 counted a total of 7,219 refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. This figure included around 1,200 refugees and migrants (mostly Afghans and Pakistanis) who were “sleeping rough” in Belgrade city, an estimated 200 of whom were unaccompanied minors. Several aid workers in Serbia, however, told AAN they believed the actual total number to be closer to 10,000, with an estimated 2,000 people staying outside the government-run centres. This report by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) also indicated that Asylum Office staff believed there were around 8,000 people living in the centres alone, in early 2017 (p 11) (see also this companion dispatch here).

(2) The area has been a key smuggling channel in the Balkans for a long time. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many victims of human trafficking were smuggled via the Macedonian–Serbian border. During the UN sanctions against Milosevic’s Yugoslavia (from 1992 to 1996), oil and goods not readily available were also smuggled into Serbia through this border.

(3) In March 2017, The Guardian reported Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) calling on Hungary to investigate an increasing number of allegations of “widespread and systematic” violence by the police. MSF based its accusations on the fact that it had provided medical treatment to 106 migrants, including 22 minors, for injuries caused by beatings, dog bites and pepper spray in 2016. Hungarian authorities dismissed the account as baseless, the newspaper reported. See also previous AAN reporting from November 2016, here.