

MIGRATION FROM AFGHANISTAN

Internal migration in Afghanistan has doubled; leaving the country is challenging.

The Eastern Mediterranean route (Afghanistan–Iran–Turkey) remains the cheapest and preferred option for migrants.

Travelling through Russia, Belarus, or Ukraine is more expensive and complicated.

In the first half of 2021, internal migration in Afghanistan doubled, with more than 300,000 Afghans leaving their homes, mainly due to drought and security concerns in rural areas, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Migration from Afghanistan to neighbouring countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan, increased. The mass exodus of people from Afghanistan is not in the interest of the Taliban, which came to power in August 2021, as this hampers the country's functioning, and the regime has sought to prevent mass emigration. Leaving Afghanistan is also challenging, as many Afghans do not have the money or documents required to cross the border and need to use the help of traffickers. If the security situation does not deteriorate and the Taliban behaves more moderately than when it came to power in 1996, the number of people leaving the country will be lower than predicted by the UNHCR, especially if the provision of humanitarian aid (including the presence of the UN) continues on the ground in Afghanistan.

The level of migratory flows from Afghanistan depend on the security situation and the policies of the Taliban-led government.

Even as the Eastern Mediterranean route (Afghanistan–Iran–Turkey) is the cheapest and therefore preferred route for illegal migrants heading to the EU from Afghanistan, a rapid increase in the number of Afghan migrants along the route is curbed by the long distances involved and the need to pay charges to cross borders. It takes migrants several months to reach Turkey and it is difficult to complete the journey without the help of traffickers. Afghan refugees have

gathered in Turkey and the Balkans, awaiting an opportunity to enter the EU as illegal entry into the Schengen Area has become increasingly challenging due to measures taken against illegal migration. According to the European Commission, the first half of 2021 saw 3,200 Afghan citizens illegally crossing the borders of EU countries, which is 41% less than in 2020. A majority of them arrived in the EU via the Western Balkans by using the help of human trafficking networks.

Restrictions imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic continue to hamper overall migration to Europe, including illegal immigration from Afghanistan. The measures resulting from the pandemic are temporary, and their effect on illegal migration is short-term. As restrictions ease, migration from Afghanistan will likely increase primarily via the Eastern Mediterranean route. This will probably not lead to mass border crossing comparable to that caused by the Syrian crisis when 821,000 refugees from Turkey entered Greece in 2015. The flow of illegal migrants to the EU will likely remain lower even if the situation in Afghanistan escalates at the same time as restrictions are eased,



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spreading out over a longer period compared with the migration flows from Syria and Iraq between 2015 and 2016.

With the easing of restrictions, migration flows may increase not only along the Eastern Mediterranean route but also on the alternative Eastern land route. This would entail a journey to the EU via Russia, Belarus or Ukraine. However, the prospects for this route are hampered by the need for a mediation network and high charges. Moreover, Afghanistan's northern neighbours have stepped up border controls, limiting the crossing options. It is therefore likely the increase on the Eastern land route, a more costly alternative, will remain marginal compared to the Eastern Mediterranean route.

Estonia is geographically remote from the major illegal migration routes. The main goal of migrants from Afghanistan so far has been to reach Germany, which has the largest Afghan community in Europe. However, with a significant Afghan community in Sweden, the flow of refugees to Estonia could increase if Scandinavia became the main destination for Afghans.

In our assessment, migratory pressure on Europe from Afghanistan will remain in 2022. Still, we do not expect to see migration on a scale like the 2015 Syrian crisis or a sudden mass concentration of Afghan refugees on European borders. Tensions in international hotbeds of conflict that affect migration are a potential source of instability for both Estonia and the EU more broadly.