

## To Belarus and Beyond

In November 2021, Seefar launched a rapid research study to collect insights among more than 600 Kurdish potential migrants, key migration experts, migrants currently at the border between Belarus and Poland, those who had successfully reached the UK or Germany, and returnees who were forced to come back to KRI on rumours and perceptions of access to Belarus and the EU's response to the border crisis.

### Our main findings include:

- Belarus is perceived as a logical choice among (potential) migrants, which was an important trigger to their departure. The issuance of visas to Belarus in KRI for example meant that a significant part of the journey could be made quickly and safely. The journey was also perceived as cheaper compared to other routes.
- The Belarus journey was promoted through (incomplete or false) stories shared on social media. For example, a majority believe that Europe is granting asylum to Kurdish migrants in Belarus.
- Respondents lacked a thorough understanding of the risk implications. Returning and transit migrants described that although some had expected the cold to be an issue, it was much worse than expected and many feared they would die.

### Our main recommendations include:

- Since potential migrants rely heavily on only a few sources, it is important to offer remote and in-person counselling - which is a practical and effective approach impacting migration behaviours. Tailored flexible conversations and accurate information help build trust and credibility amongst potential Kurdish migrants, leading them to make more informed and safer decisions for themselves and their families.
- Prepare now for a potential migration surge in the spring. These decisions will ultimately affect Europe's options to influence the region, deliver humanitarian support, or deal with irregular migrant arrivals. Even if limited, more effective communication now will pay off later. There is a need for a service now which shares credible and factual information to help stem migration flows to Europe.
- Help migrants ask the right questions and interpret information by providing one-on-one counselling. Potential migrants not only lack key facts, they may also struggle to make sense of the implications of information they receive.
- Invest in alternatives: Increased funding and partnering with local skills training providers in Iraqi Kurdistan would allow more potential migrants to invest in local alternatives at home rather than pursue irregular migration.

# Iraqi Kurdish Migration Plans, Perceptions and Needs

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Kurdish migrants from Iraq were, and continue to be, stuck in no man's land on the Belarus-Poland border throughout Winter 2021/22. In November 2021, Seefar launched a rapid research study to collect insights among Kurdish potential migrants, migrants currently at the border between Belarus and Poland, those who had successfully reached the UK or Germany, and returnees who were forced to come back to KRI on rumours and perceptions of access to Belarus and the EU's response to the border crisis.

Throughout December 2021, Seefar was able to conduct:

- 571 quantitative interviews with Kurdish potential migrants, transit migrants, and returnees.
- 36 in-depth interviews, both in-presence and remotely, with Kurdish potential migrants, transit migrants, and returnees.
- 15 key informant interviews with Kurdish experts on the situation in Belarus (members of the Kurdish parliament, Kurdish representatives in Poland and Belarus, journalists, NGOs staff and legal experts).
- 777 comments analysed on facebook to help us better understand the audience migration motivations.

The findings gathered in this document provide a unique insight into the challenges, experiences, and beliefs of Kurds who attempted - or plan - to irregularly migrate to Europe via Belarus.

## The Situation in Belarus from Then to Now

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### A logical choice as a trigger to departure

Respondents agreed that a mix of a lack of jobs, corruption and nepotism drives migration intentions in KRI. A latent feeling of hopelessness and lack of change makes many think about migration on a day-to-day basis - but does not always mean departure is imminent.

When information on the Belarusian route spread, our data suggests that many immediately began weighing the available irregular migration options against each other to possibly take advantage of the new route. Returned and transit Kurdish migrants described that rather than taking the more dangerous, costly or longer routes via Turkey, Greece or the Balkans, Belarus was what many perceived to be a logical step in order to reach Europe.

In contrast to a usual waiting period in which migrants consider migration but may not leave immediately, these quick and easy considerations led many to think of Belarus as the best available option and wanting to take advantage of the new route right away.

- Issuance of visas to Belarus in KRI meant that a significant part of the journey could be made quickly and safely. One returnee said he went via Belarus because “they opened the visa for us” (19-year-old returnee).
- The price was perceived to be lower. The visa and first leg of the trip cost between USD 3,500 to 4,500 compared to USD 6,500 and more to reach Turkey.
- From Belarus “Europe is very close” (23-year-old returnee), leading migrants to think it would be easier to reach.
- The Belarus route was thought to be safer because “it was on land [...]. You didn't need to suffer the dangers of water routes” (29-year-old returnee).

“I heard things from smugglers and friends or relatives. The smuggler told me I can get to Germany in three days and that I'll walk only four hours and this really fueled me. Imagine reaching your goal in such a short time and with only a little effort. That really made me make my decision.”

**19-year-old returnee**

## Momentum created by social media

Qualitative interviews suggest that the image of Belarus as a logical choice was largely driven by stories shared on social media. There was consensus among respondents that they didn't know very much about Belarus. They then saw someone talk about the ease of the route on Facebook or Tiktok and decided to leave. One 32-year-old returnee for example shared that "people were saying it is really easy to cross the border. We have been told that you can hire a car and cross the border. We weren't aware of the border situation whatsoever. After what we heard, we were quite happy, and we applied for a visa quite quickly."

Networks of friends and family reinforced the information people received online by providing real-life cases of people who "made it" to Europe via Belarus. One returnee for example said he had discussed the route with a friend who then applied for a visa and "11 days after that he was in Manchester."

The success stories - which functioned as "proof" for the route being easier, cheaper and shorter - created a momentum in which many made the "logical" choice to leave as soon as possible.

"I was listening to Karwan Rwanzy (he is returnee and has a Facebook page where he discussed migration topics), a lot of people listened to him. And even other people on social media were saying it's so easy! The only hard part is getting the visa. After you get the visa you can go to Belarus and enter Poland and then take a train from Poland to Germany. I got convinced and decided to go."

**24-year-old returnee**

"In the beginning Belarus road was so easy I was motivating people to come. I was telling them it costs much less and the road is easy."

**24-year-old transit migrant**

## From easy to life-threatening

This momentum, however, turned into a life-threatening situation the more migrants arrived at the Belarus/Poland border. Returning and transit migrants described that although some had expected the cold to be an issue, it was much worse than expected and many feared they would die: "We slept in the forest but it was so cold that before I slept I said goodbye to my friends in case I died of the cold." (30-year-old returnee).

A majority of returnees and transit migrants also described abuse by local border guards. This ranged from verbal to physical abuse, including physical humiliation, beatings, and even death. One returnee described that border guards took their clothes and "threw us in the water" where they were then attacked by the guards' dogs (23-year-old returnee).

Many stated that the constant back and forth between Belarus and Poland/Lithuania was particularly hard. Belarusian border guards would encourage or help migrants to cross the fences, Polish or Lithuanian guards would catch them and sent them back but Belarus, leave the migrants in no-man's land, or make them try over and over again: "When we were talking to the people that went before us they didn't know about the term "soccer ball". The term got created because Poland and Belarus would throw us back and forth between their fences. They would play with your life." (23-year-old returnee).

A high number of families with children at the border was particularly noteworthy for qualitative interview respondents. The most vulnerable were most often subject to (sexual) abuse and died of starvation or the cold. At the same time, some interviewees noted that the presence of children meant that the little food or hygiene available would be prioritised for families, leaving single men and women unable to eat or wash themselves.

Meanwhile, interviewees agreed that there was almost no support provided in Belarus. The vast majority of respondents said that no international governments or organisations were present. One 25-year-old returnee said: "I was in Belarus for about one month. We didn't get any help or support from European countries whatsoever. [...] I was asking if the UN is here and they said the closest UN center is in Moscow." A few mentioned that "The [Belarus] government provided us a very small amount of food." (32-year-old returnee) and that some NGOs were providing clothes. However, most agreed that they were only provided with the bare minimum: dirty water and one small meal a day.

# What Next?

## Knowledge of key issues remains low: Provide credible and factual information

A significant number of respondents lack knowledge of key risks in relation to the journey and life in Europe. Many believed that “you just need to be physically active” (24-year-old transit migrant) to be able to make it to Europe via Belarus - and stay in Europe.



To check respondents' knowledge of rumours circulating in KRI, we tested a series of true/false questions. The number of respondents who answered a question correctly are displayed above. The most important belief is also the least well understood: a majority believe that Europe is granting asylum to Kurdish migrants in Belarus.

### Give the facts.

There are essential, basic knowledge gaps that can easily be filled. A simple focus on correcting misunderstandings through migration communications would be useful. We recommend prioritising a maximum of five facts such as: Long-term settlement in Europe is for vulnerable people, and Iraq is deemed to be a “safe country”. The five facts should be connected to follow-on steps that support decision-making and behaviour.



Additional themes of low knowledge included:

- **Life in Europe is easy and I won't have to go back to KRI.** Respondents shared that they believed it is easy to get residency and a job once they reach Germany or the UK. A TMP social media user commented: "The EU never deports anyone. [...] You need to tell them they never deport anyone without their want." Many respondents suggested that "information on legal routes would be very helpful, I would actually like to try the legal routes."
- **Once I make it to Poland, it's easy to get to my final destination.** Taxi or train connections to Germany frequently featured among respondents' expectations of the journey once they would leave behind the difficult situation at the border in Belarus: "then they get a taxi and travel to Germany."
- **The more I pay a smuggler, the more likely it is that I'll get to Europe easily.** Returnees warned that migrants depend heavily on smugglers for this route but are almost always exploited as cars "supposed to pick us up" would still not come after waiting in the cold for 36 hours (19-year-old returnee). Potential migrants however were confident that "the more money you pay the easier everything gets" (22-year-old potential migrant).

"We went through so much...they beat us...humiliated us...took our phones and money. If someone is not so desperate they really shouldn't migrate. I think talking about the risks and dangers of irregular routes would be really useful because that's what people actually need to know."

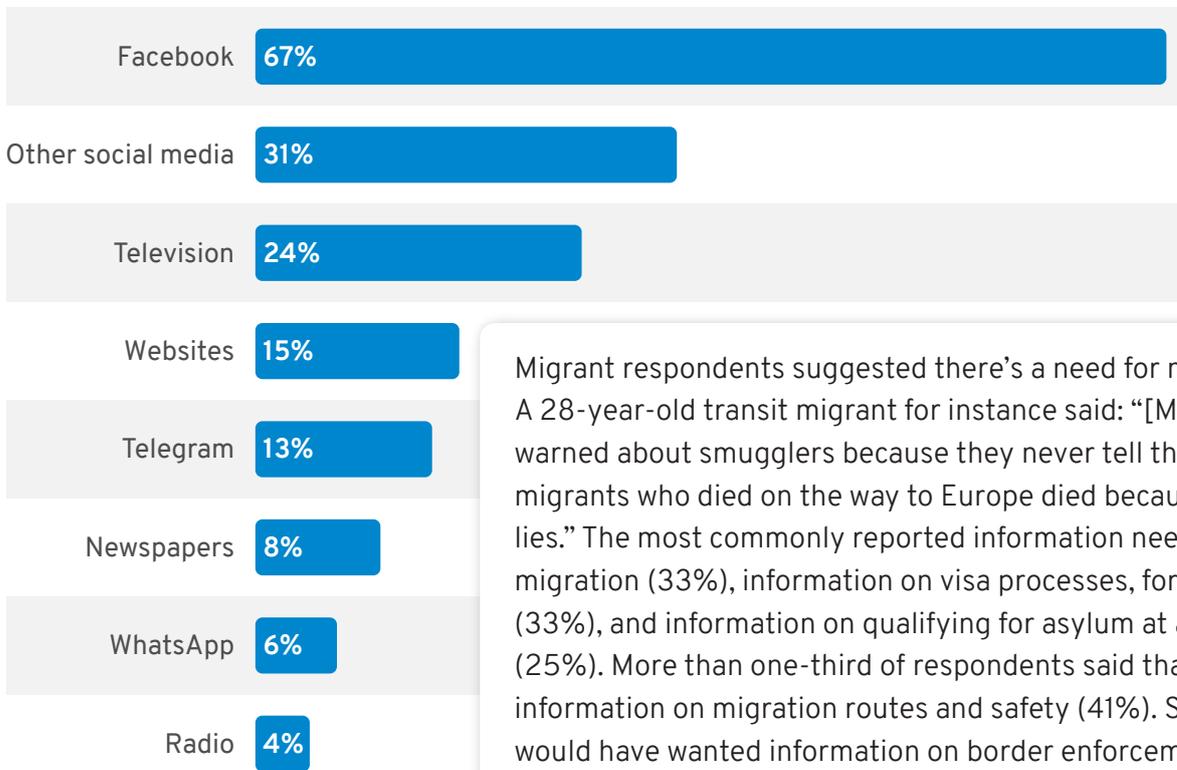
**21-year-old  
transit migrant**

## Potential migrants rely heavily on only a few sources: Provide tailored information

This lack of knowledge emerges in an environment where migrants receive information from a relatively small number of different sources: Most relied heavily on social media and specific Facebook groups, TikTok accounts or Telegram chats. Respondents in qualitative interviews repeatedly mentioned three specific social media profiles. Our social network analysis also highlighted pages and people with disproportionate followings among people considering irregular migration or suffering forced displacement. Quantitative data, too, suggested high reliance on social media (see graphic). Whereas returnees more often described hearing stories from friends and family networks, current potential migrants appear to rely more on online sources.

**Remote and in-person counselling - rather than relying on social media alone - is a practical and effective approach impacting migration behaviours.** Tailored flexible conversations and accurate information help build trust and credibility amongst potential Kurdish migrants, leading them to make more informed and safer decisions for themselves and their families.





Migrant respondents suggested there's a need for more information. A 28-year-old transit migrant for instance said: “[Migrants] should be warned about smugglers because they never tell the truth and many migrants who died on the way to Europe died because of smugglers’ lies.” The most commonly reported information needs were around legal migration (33%), information on visa processes, forms and applications (33%), and information on qualifying for asylum at a given destination (25%). More than one-third of respondents said that they needed information on migration routes and safety (41%). Some respondents would have wanted information on border enforcement and border crossings (18%) and information on access to services (21%).

All key informants meanwhile agreed that there is a lack of information campaigns in Iraqi Kurdistan. Only a handful of local refugee organisations run small awareness campaigns. Experts therefore suggested that, “there is a need for the continuation of information campaigns [...]” (Kurdish representative in Poland).

Using influencers in campaigns can significantly increase reach and trust. In December 2021, TMP Kurdistan partnered with Kurdish social media influencers to post about the service and the information provided to potential migrants, generating much higher engagement. A single post led to over 500 requests for a consultation in a single day.

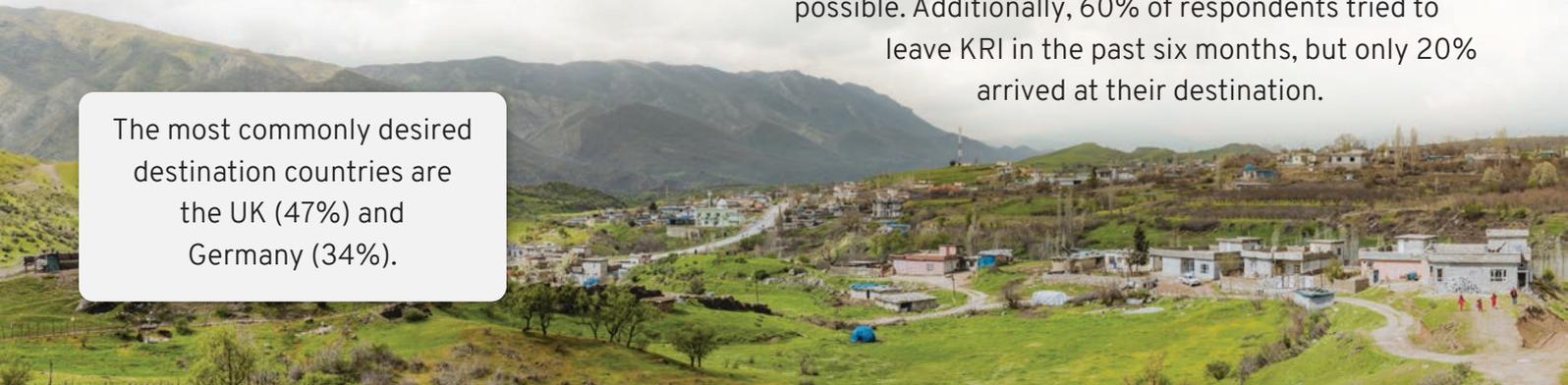


**Amplify campaign messages through collaboration with influencers.**  
 This gives the audience a chance to hear campaign messages from the Kurdish community to help trust-building and reinforce campaign messages.

## Many plan on leaving KRI: Prepare now for a potential migration surge in spring

More than half of our respondents planned to migrate out of KRI (87%). Just one third said they wanted to migrate legally, whereas 32% said they wanted to migrate irregularly, and 30% said they wanted to migrate in any way possible. Additionally, 60% of respondents tried to leave KRI in the past six months, but only 20% arrived at their destination.

The most commonly desired destination countries are the UK (47%) and Germany (34%).



Potential migrants said they were waiting for spring and summer to attempt reaching Europe via Belarus. The majority said that migration via Belarus in spring would be safer, cheaper and faster than going via Turkey and that they planned on waiting another three months before leaving.

A minority also concluded that Turkey was a better option for them in the immediate future as they feared the lack of a visa to Belarus and closed borders may seriously impede their plans.

Experts, too, cite that migration to Europe will increase again once the weather gets warmer. Despite conflicting reports that travel agencies were blacklisted for facilitating travel to Belarus, there are still some operating in Iraqi Kurdistan and potential migrants are willing to pay for their services.

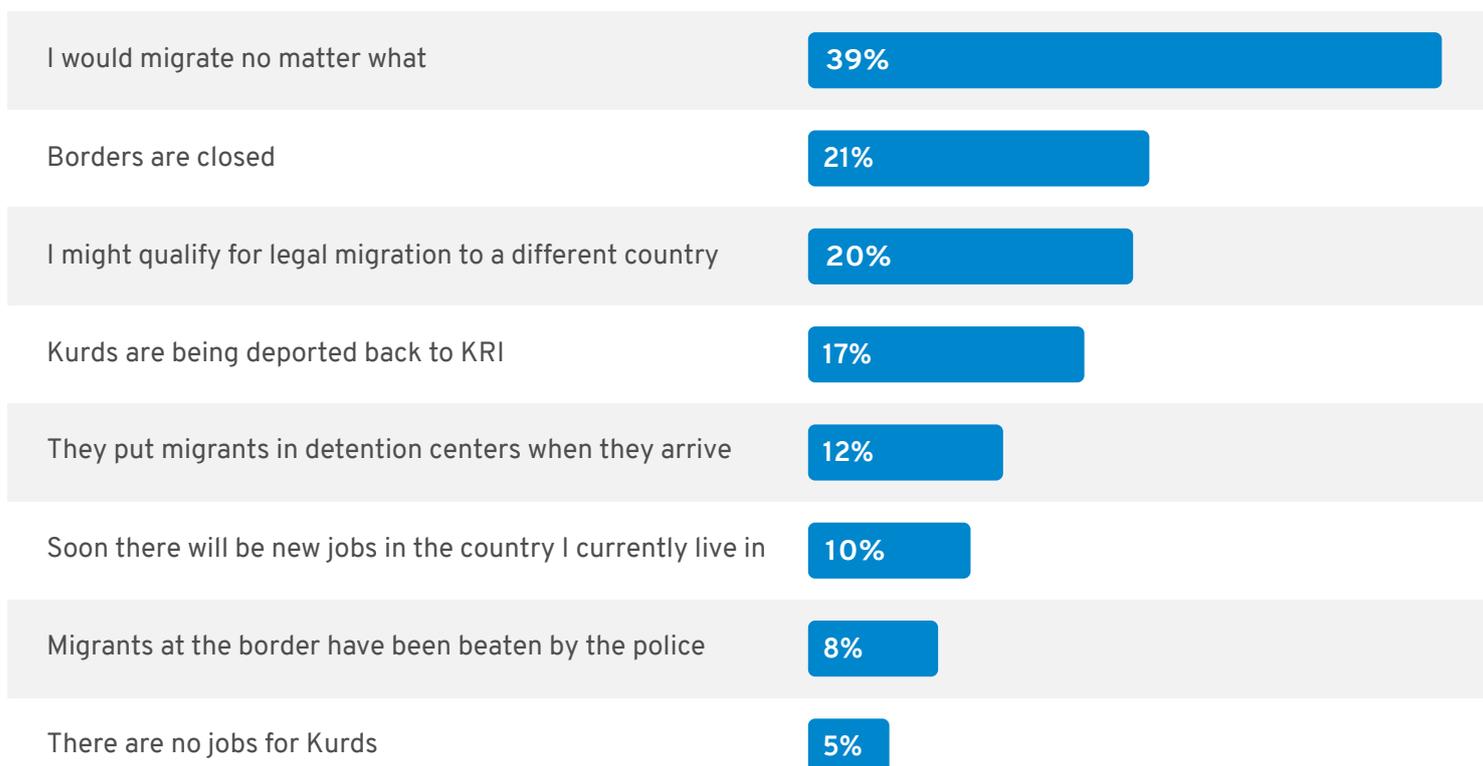
### Prepare now for a potential migration surge in the spring.

These decisions will ultimately affect Europe's options to influence the region, deliver humanitarian support, or deal with irregular migrant arrivals. Even if limited, more effective communication now will pay off later. There is a need for a service now which shares credible and factual information to help stem migration flows to Europe.

## Migration no matter what: Help migrants ask the right questions

With migration via Belarus becoming harder - and potential migrants being generally more aware of those changes - the instantaneous decisions to migrate based on a "logical choice" are now no longer predominant. With the window of opportunity closing, potential migrants once again find themselves in the situation of latent hopelessness. Any new information or opportunity can lead to an uptake of plans, regardless of whether the information is accurate or may in fact have negative consequences.

We asked for factors that would cause people to invest in alternatives to migration. The most commonly cited factors are shown below. The statement "I would migrate no matter what" is useful for highlighting that information and decisions are not being processed rationally - migrants need help to question their first reaction to new information.



Finding that there are no jobs for Kurds at their destination does not have a high impact on respondents' migration decisions (5%). At the same time, qualifying for legal migration to a different country is rated to have at least some effect for some respondents (21%). This mismatch, too, suggests that the way information is presented matters to migrants - but often without questioning it. While possibly qualifying for legal migration bears a promise and may therefore make some migrants think they might reconsider their plans, the information that there are no jobs available upon successful migration has the opposite effect.

**Help migrants ask the right questions and interpret information by providing one-on-one counselling.**  
Potential migrants not only lack key facts, they may also struggle to make sense of the implications of information they receive.

## A lot of money invested into migration: Improve local pathways in Iraq

Key informants agree that a large majority of Kurds migrating to Europe are wealthier people, reportedly paying up to USD 30,000 to reach Europe. Our data suggests the same: Returnees report having paid up to USD 18,000 up to the point of their return; transit migrants have spent around USD 8,000 to 10,000 thus far; and although many potential migrants underestimated those costs, they, too, were willing to pay around USD 10,000 to 15,000 to reach Europe.

"I was willing to pay USD 17,500 just to get to Germany."

**30-year-old returnee**

At the same time, our research continues to show that potential migrants are often willing to first engage in legal alternatives in their country of origin. Among all groups there was interest - but also a lot of confusion - in legal migration or local alternatives. As one 23-year-old returnee put it: "I like legal routes but any travel agency charges you USD 18,000 till Italy. And for someone like me who wants to reach the United Kingdom I have to pay another USD 6,000. If I have more than USD 20,000 to 30,000 in Kurdistan, why would I need to go to Europe?"

Investing at home rather than in irregular migration is an option particularly relevant for Iraqi Kurds, due to their low chance of asylum being granted in Germany compared to other more at-risk nationalities.

**Increased funding and partnering with local skills training providers in Iraqi Kurdistan would allow more potential migrants to invest in local alternatives at home rather than pursue irregular migration.**

In Senegal this year, Seefar partnered with GIZ and ICCO to provide livelihood training and business support to beneficiaries within the fishing communities in Mbour. Preliminary results from the evaluation showed that 90% of the beneficiaries attending those training said that the livelihood opportunities had a strong influence on their migration decisions. Future campaigns could source similar partnerships with livelihood organisations and support consultees to actively pursue these opportunities.

