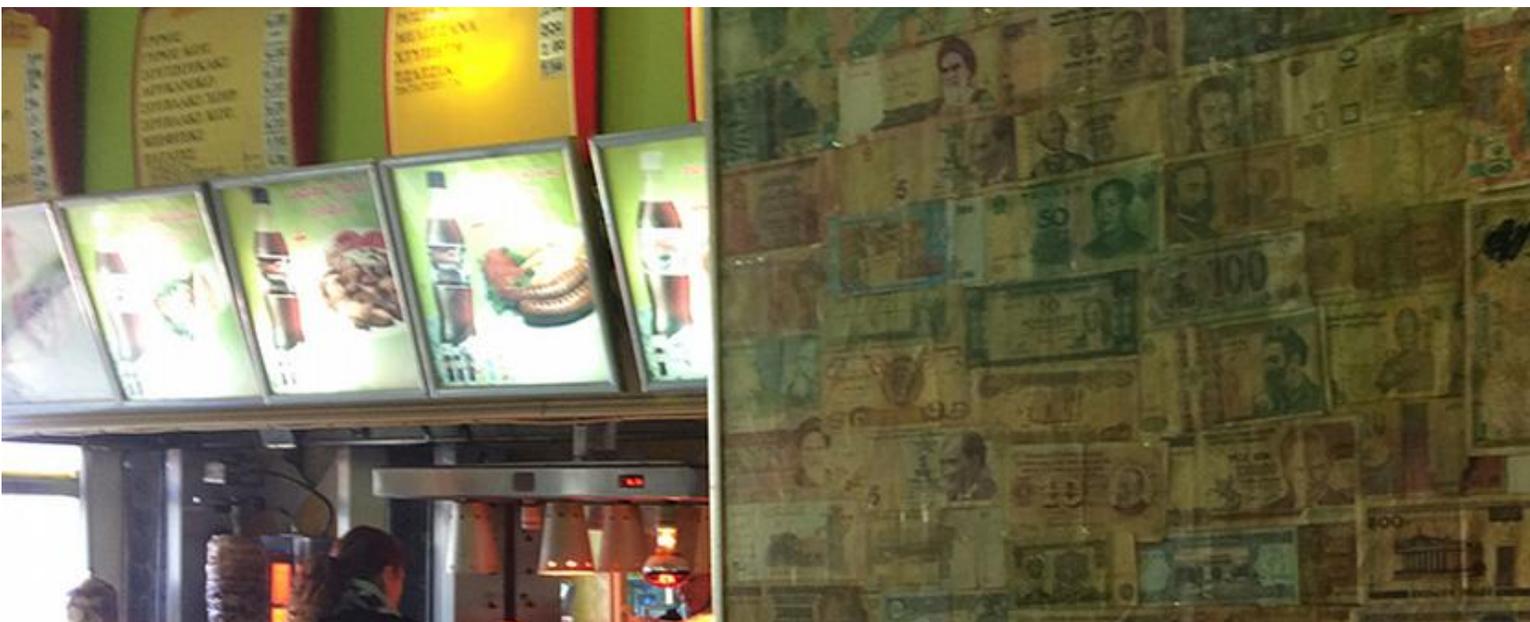




In a small kebab shop across the broad avenue that runs in front of the Thessaloniki train station, customers often gather and huddle around electrical outlets charging their phones. Over the past two years the shop, a family business run by Evangelia Karanikolas and her husband, developed into a key stopping point for many migrants traveling the so-called Balkan route to northern Europe.

Karanikolas offered free use of the electricity and bathrooms to people [sleeping rough](#) in the nearby buildings. She also provided free food when she could, and even a warm place to sleep for some if the weather was cold. For this reason she has become known to many migrants as 'Mammi'.

Today, even following the sealing of the border with Macedonia, little appears to have changed. Thousands of refugees may be well below the great tide of people who traveled the route in 2015 and early 2016, but they are still coming - and going. "In any way, they are trying to find some way out," Karanikolas told DW. When asked about the migrants in the shop confirm that they are seeking passage out of Greece.



## Leaky borders

The unprecedented movement of people that saw approximately 1 million mainly Syrian and Iraqi migrants enter Europe in 2015-2016 may have been stemmed following efforts to seal Greece's northern borders through a 2015 agreement. Yet today migrants and refugees continue to head north through a number of illicit channels, under the radar of immigration officials and filling the coffers of criminal people smuggling networks to the tune of millions of euros.

"I would say it is on the rise," one high-ranking police official involved in efforts to combat people smuggling in Thessaloniki told DW with regards to the smugglers' activity. "Following the closure of the Balkan route, there was a relative calm, shall we say, while people waited to see what would happen, what the policies were going to be. In the weeks we have seen a rise in arrests... There are active organizations and there are people who wish to exploit the law of [supply and demand](#)."

The precise numbers of people successfully being smuggled out of Greece are impossible to know for certain. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal citing European immigration officials stated that the whereabouts of as many as 13,000 migrants and refugees who had been registered in Greece is currently unknown. The same article, citing unnamed Greek and European officials, claimed that about 500 per week were being smuggled over the northern border. Yet experts say this figure is necessarily little more than an estimate.

### Nebulous networks

According to police to be smuggled from Thessaloniki to Belgrade usually costs at least between 800 and 1,300 euros (\$852-\$1,384) per head. Another 1,500 euros is required to reach Germany. Often this money is not paid by the migrants directly but by their families through networks spread across multiple countries.

Such prices reflect both the demand for smugglers as well as the difficulty in crossing the border. When movement across the border was largely unimpeded, prices collapsed. Now that the Balkan route is more difficult for migrants, it is more lucrative for the [smugglers](#). "The smugglers certainly celebrated," the police official said of the closure of the Balkan route. "We heard from people involved in this that they were pleased because they would be better able to work."

Yet the police describe people smuggling operations as loose criminal networks that are different from the closed pyramid structures associated with the Italian or Russian mafias. While this makes the groups easier to infiltrate, it also means that when significant arrests are made other

All for the lack of legal alternatives

Police say that people who want to get away from their countries will always find a way

One way of addressing the rules of supply and demand would be to create legal routes, thereby reducing the incentives for refugees to use illegal smuggling alternatives, according to Dimitriadi.

The criminal activity may also be making Europe less safe. This is because the same underground network that facilitates the movement of asylum seekers can also be exploited by criminal and terror groups. "That these networks are also used by some fighters, that has been proven recently with the events in Paris," the police official told DW.

"To put it very plainly it is always safer if we know who's coming," Dimitriadi says. "In order to know who is coming, it is better if we can 'choose' also who that person will be. Why not make it legal? We can choose that. It will be safer for us and beneficial for them. It is a win win."

However, with Europe showing little appetite for the creation of new legal migration routes, the current situation of police and smugglers on Greece's borders looks set to continue, with increasingly desperate migrants.

*\*Name has been changed.*