

At the Gate of Europe

A Report on Refugees on the Western Balkan Route

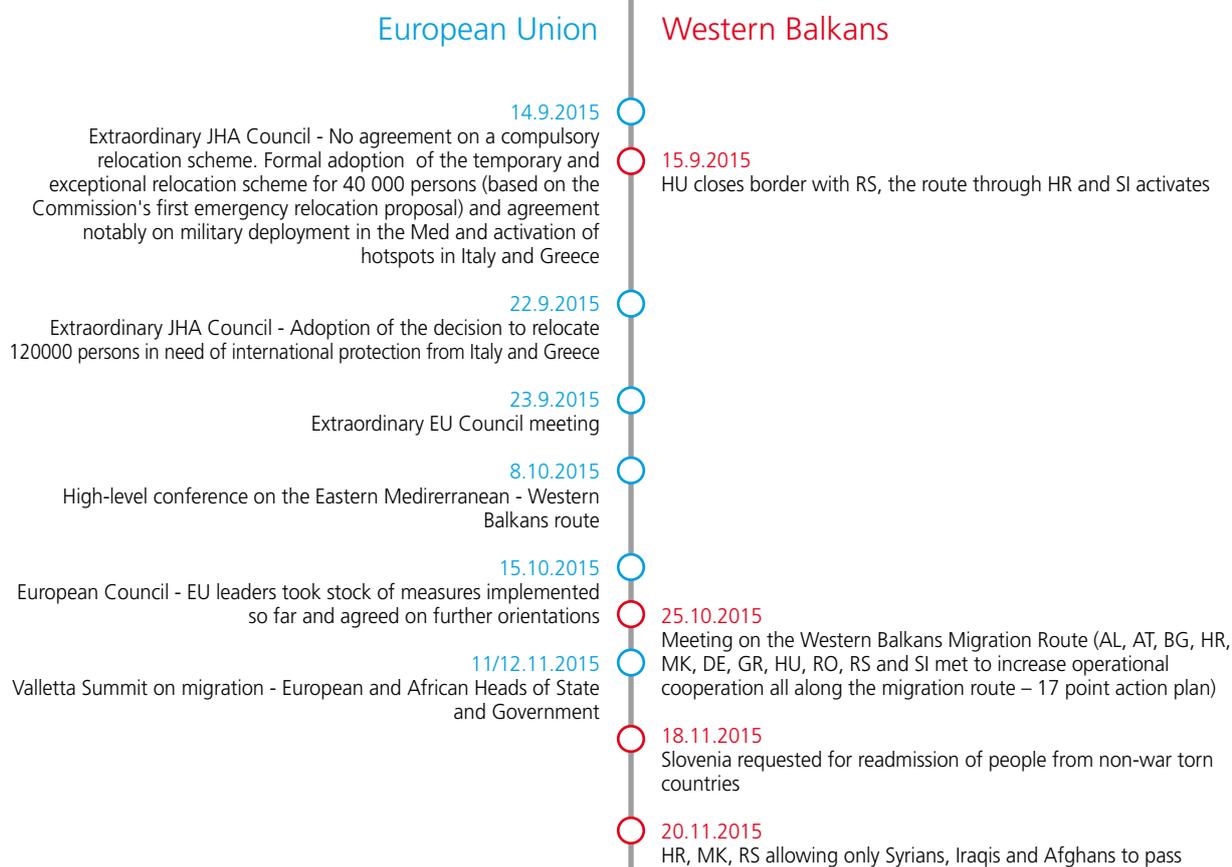
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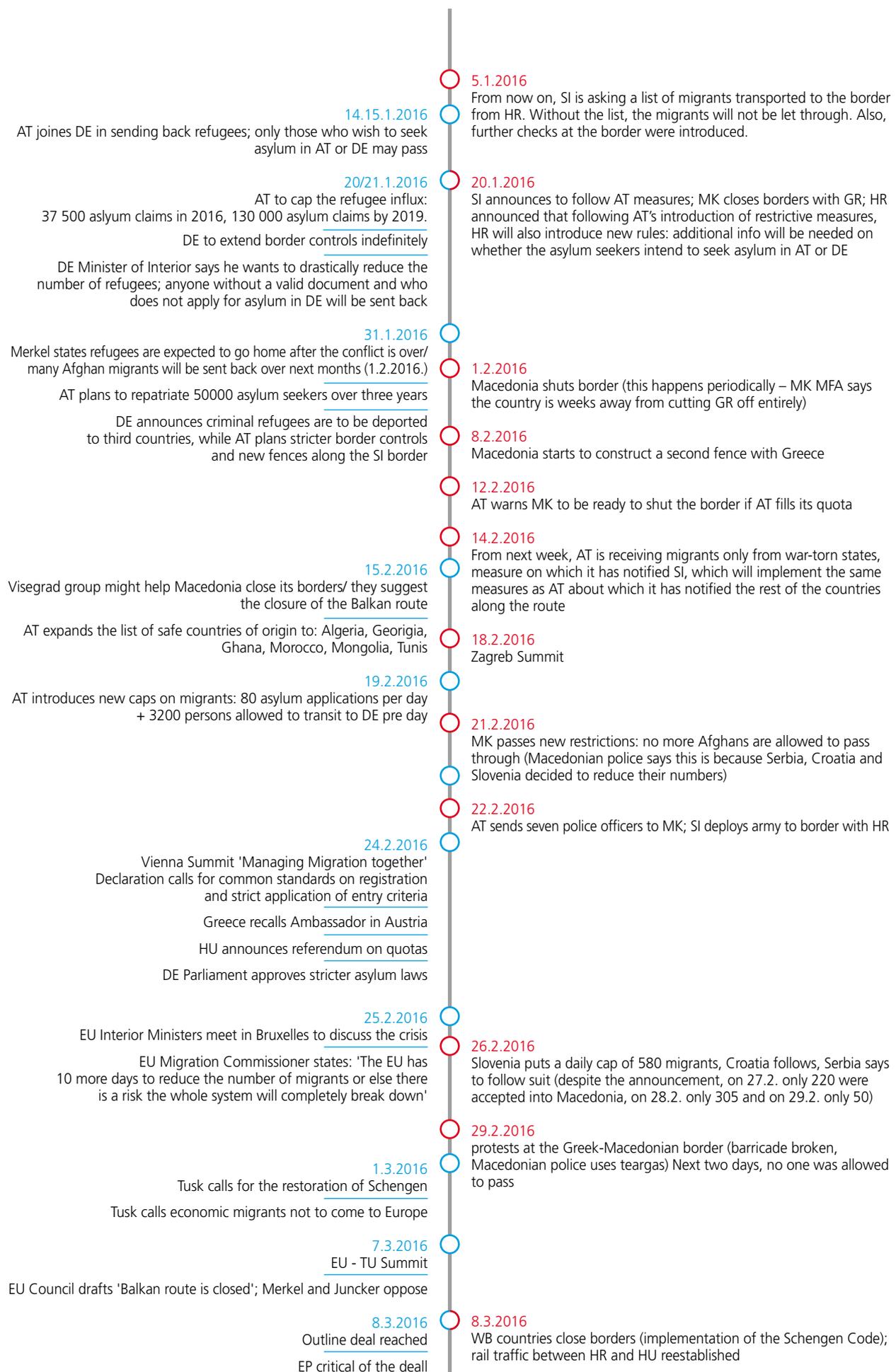
- Between September 2015 and March 2016, approximately 700,000 migrants headed for Western Europe entered the territories of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. All four countries served as transit routes for migrants on their way to Austria, Germany, and Sweden. An insignificant number of refugees applied for asylum in the four countries.
- Internal economic and political challenges, exacerbated by still unsolved bilateral issues and the legacy of the wars in the 1990s, continue to threaten regional stability. The recent migration crisis has only added to these tensions. These rising tensions have led to speculation about a renewal of conflict amongst these neighbours, some of whom are already EU member states; the others are EU candidate countries.
- Their shared geographical proximity along the refugee route has mattered more than pre-existing relationships to the EU. All shared the same concern that Germany and Austria might close their borders to migrants. None of the countries wanted to become a hotspot for refugees or host them over a longer period of time.
- After imposing daily entry limits of refugees in February, Austria announced a change of course with regard to the migration crisis. Consequently, it coordinated a set of meetings that effectively closed the Western Balkan route on March 9, 2016.
- While the countries along the Balkan route struggled to organise appropriate registration, accommodation, transport, and support for those entering their territories, concerns mounted over the daily waves of migrants entering the EU—and with it came mutual accusations.

Balkan route



Timeline of the most important dates





PREFACE

This report provides an overview of the recent refugee crisis occurring in the Western Balkans between September 2015, when the first wave of refugees arrived in Croatia following Hungary's decision to close its border with Serbia, and March 2016, when Macedonia closed off its border with Greece, effectively shuttering the Western Balkan route. For perhaps the first time since the 1990s, news emanated daily from this region, as personal narratives, institutional reactions, and media accounts filled the public space.

Whereas day-to-day events have garnered significant attention, the purpose of this report is to assess more collectively and comprehensively the last six months as a whole in order to grasp what happened, what has been learned, and what will be the crisis' impact. This report describes the conditions and procedures for migrants along the WB route, and how these conditions and procedures evolved over time. Moreover, it attempts to capture political discourse dynamics and media reporting on migration in each country, relations between neighbouring states, and their interactions with the European Commission and European capitals. The goal is to contribute to an informed debate on migration, the integration of refugees, and the effects of the refugee crisis for the societies in South East Europe as well as for the European Union.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the Western Balkan route, made up of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia became the primary transit path for migrants headed for Western Europe. While the countries along the Balkan route struggled to organise appropriate registration, accommodation, transport, and support for those entering their territories, concerns mounted over the daily wave of migrants entering the EU—and with it came mutual accusations. Agreement over a common EU solution was further hindered by the position taken by the Visegrad Group¹, who refused to participate in any relocation mechanism, and as well advocated for a complete halt to further migrant entry into Europe.

A series of seemingly uncoordinated and unilateral measures adopted by individual countries eventually took shape in the form of two conflicting approaches on how to deal with the crisis. Germany's proposal, supported by the majority of EU member states and the EC, calling for

managed migration via an agreement with Turkey, was challenged by the Visegrad Group's proposal to close the borders entirely along the Western Balkan route. At the onset of 2016, restrictions only increased for entering migrants, particularly as European states reinstated border controls, which for the first time threatened and undermined the Schengen Area. Eventually, Austria and Slovenia joined the block supporting the closure of borders along the WB route, and had the support of the President of the European Council Donald Tusk, who repeatedly called for the restoration of Schengen Area rules.

On March 18, 2016, the EU–Turkey Summit resulted in a wide-ranging agreement intended to stem the inflow of migrants into Europe. However, despite Angela Merkel's decision to not include the closure of the WB route in the agreement, Slovenia announced it would seal off its border the following day (in full compliance with the Schengen Border Code). Like dominoes, the other three WB countries soon followed suit.

Earlier, as winter approached, WB countries increasingly coordinated migrant policy and action, both logistically and politically. In November 2015, Croatia, Macedonia, and Serbia took their first joint restrictive measure; they began to allow transit only to migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. This was a result of Slovenia's request to redirect migrants from non-war torn countries back to Croatia.

At the beginning of 2016, Austria and Germany began to restrict the number of migrants by declaring that only those seeking asylum in Austria and Germany would be allowed entry. Slovenia and Croatia adjusted their policies accordingly. One week later, Austria announced it would limit the number of asylum claims to 37,500 in 2016 (and 130,000 by 2019). Soon thereafter, it introduced a host of plans that would limit the number of arrivals, repatriate 50,000 asylum seekers over the next three years, expand the list of safe countries of origin, and construct new fences along its border with Slovenia. Finally, on February 17, 2015, Austria introduced new restrictive measures that limited the number of asylum applications to 80 per day, and the number of transits to Germany to 3,200 per day. This measure came into force one day after a meeting between the Austrian, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, and Macedonian heads of police in Zagreb, whereby collaboration was reached to significantly reduce migrant inflow. In addition, they agreed upon several concrete measures, including the standardization of migrant registration,² and entry on humanitarian grounds (e.g., for migrants hailing from Iraq and Syria). Following these decisions, Macedonia passed new controls that restricted Afghan refugees from crossing its border. As well, Iraqis and Syrians would now be subject to further regulations, which included full body searches, language tests, and a

1 The Visegrad Group (also known as the Visegrad Four or simply V4) is an alliance of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.

2 First entry would only be allowed for persons that fulfil the conditions of entry laid down in the Schengen Border Code and relevant national legislation.

thorough examination of all documentation.³ Macedonia explained these heightened measures as a response to the decisions taken by countries further along the route.

The consistent inflow of migrants and increasing dissatisfaction among some EU member states over Greece's handling of the crisis, hastened calls to bolster security along the Macedonian-Greek border. Macedonia's decision to construct a second fence along the Greek border on February 8, 2016, was not only strongly supported by the Visegrad Group, but more broadly, signalled the group's willingness to support Macedonia during the crisis. The Visegrad Group had previously sent additional police units to Macedonia in December 2015. Likewise, Serbia did the same within the framework of the Convention on Police Cooperation in South East Europe. On February 9 and 22 respectively, Croatia and Austria sent additional police support to the Macedonian border. On February 24, Austria hosted a summit in Vienna for the ministers of foreign affairs and the interior of Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, and the Western Balkan Six⁴. The summit confirmed the previously agreed upon measures of the heads of police services, and called for common standards and the stricter application of entry criteria. The following day, EU interior ministers met in Brussels to discuss the crisis, at which point the EU Commissioner for migration warned that, "The EU has ten more days to reduce the number of migrants or else there is a risk the whole system will completely break down."⁵ The following day, Slovenia capped the number of migrants allowed to enter the country at 580. Croatia and Serbia adopted similar quotas. Over the next three days, however, only 220, 305, and 50 migrants entered Macedonia, respectively. These new entry restrictions quickly aggravated the already tense situation at the Greek-Macedonian border, which culminated in protests on February 29. Migrants stranded on the Greek side of the border broke the barricade and were quickly barraged with teargas by the Macedonian police. For the next two days, the border was closed entirely, giving impetus to the EU-Turkey summit, which effectively shut down the Western Balkan route.

THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA⁶



General information

The route from Greece to Western Europe originated in the town of Idomeni, which flanks Macedonia's⁷ southern border. Upon successfully crossing the border, migrants were accepted in Macedonia at the Vinojug camp in Gevgelija. From there, they travelled north to Tabanovce, where they expected to cross into the Serbian border town, Miratovac.

In 2015 and early 2016, several hundred thousand migrants passed through Macedonia. Unfortunately, the exact number cannot be configured, as Macedonia only began registering migrants in June 2015. The UNHCR began monitoring Gevgelija on July 1, 2015, and has since estimated that 697,228 migrants transited through this location. According to the UN Resident Coordinator's office, an estimated 750,000 migrants entered the country in 2015.⁸ Approximate daily arrivals ranged between 10,000 (October)⁹ and 5,000 (November).¹⁰

³ European Council on Refugees and Exiles. Western Balkans News Brief February 16-29, 2016. Available at: <http://us1.campaign-archive2.com/?u=8e3ebd297b1510becc6d6d690&id=8fac50c411>

⁴ Refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

⁵ Reuters. The EU has 10 days to see progress on migrant crisis or Schengen unravels. February 2, 2016. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-avramopoulos-idUSKCN0VY22T>

⁶ The official admission to the UN was made on the understanding that The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was a provisional name for the country pending the final settlement of the name dispute, 8 April 1993, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/47/a47r225.htm>

⁷ In this report, we use the name Macedonia without any further inferring but noting that the three other countries analyzed in this report (and Austria, for example) recognize the Republic of Macedonia as the official name of the country.

⁸ Refugee and migrant numbers and trends in FYROM, Serbia, and Croatia. Update from the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, Skopje. December 9, 2015

⁹ Velina Lylianova. Briefing January 2016. European Parliamentary Research Service. PE 573.949

¹⁰ UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016, pg. 49

Legislative framework

The foundation of Macedonia's asylum system is the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, which was substantially improved by amendments in 2012. Further, and in response to the immediate refugee crisis, the law was amended on June 16, 2015 to ease previously restrictive rules that had put migrants at risk of arbitrary detention and pushbacks at the border. Namely, migrants were now afforded the possibility to express an intention to submit an asylum application at the border, which allowed them to enter the country legally for a period up to 72-hours, before they were required to formally submit an application. In June 2015, the government initiated a procedure to draft a new asylum law that would conform to EU asylum instruments by 2016. Despite improvements in the legislative framework, the UNHCR conducted a review of Macedonia's asylum system in August 2015, and concluded that the country could not be recommended as a safe third country because of implementation difficulties.

Timeline

The migration crisis in Macedonia escalated dramatically in the spring of 2015, whereby Amnesty International documented the serious abuse of migrants at the hands of authorities. Moreover, at least thirty migrants died in early 2015 after being struck by trains while walking along railway lines (as illegals, migrants were not allowed to use public transportation¹¹). On April 24, in a single incident, fourteen migrants were killed by a train, which hastened the need for the above-noted legislative amendments.¹² As migration pressures swelled, Macedonia declared a state of emergency on August 21 at its northern and southern borders; it deployed the army, who combatted migrants with teargas and deafening hand grenades. Macedonia had hoped that by calling on its armed forces, it would put pressure on Brussels to come to its aid,¹³ with the understanding that European funds would surely cover the costs of the crisis.¹⁴ In reality, however, Macedonia did not incur any substantial costs, as refugees by and large paid for their own transportation to the Serbian border,

once they were permitted to use public transportation. It should be noted that the price of this particular railway ticket rose from 7 to 25 EUR during these contentious months, allowing the Macedonian railway company to incur millions in profits.¹⁵ Other businesses, including taxi and bus services, vendors, and shop keepers also profited.¹⁶ What's more, non-governmental organizations primarily paid for the costs to run collection centres. Still, the general perception remains that migrants pose not only a security threat but as well present a huge financial liability to already strained economies.

The state of emergency was extended through September by virtue of a parliamentary vote in June 2016. According to the Ministry of the Interior, between June and August 2015, 52,757 persons were registered at the border. This was an exponential increase from the same period in 2014, whereby the number of registered persons was estimated at 1,750.¹⁷ As thousands of new arrivals continued to arrive on Europe's door, Macedonia, following other countries along the Western Balkan route, introduced a nationality screening program on November 18, 2015. As noted above, only those hailing from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq were allowed to cross its border. On November 28, Macedonia began to erect a fence along its border with Greece in an attempt to limit the influx. On February 18, 2016 an agreement was reached between the heads of police services of the five countries along the route (Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria) to allow entry only on the basis of humanitarian grounds; this included a requirement to present a photo ID at the border. The new restrictions caused tremendous overcrowding along the Greek side of the border and led to several conflicts between migrants and the Macedonian police.

Registration

Macedonia started registering irregular migrants and displaced persons on June 19, 2015. At first, police were able to register only one-third to one-half of all arriving migrants; however, in December 2015, the system became fully functional and all those entering have since

11 Francesca Rolandi. Macedonia, the Refugee Emergency. Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso. 23 September 2015. Available at: <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Macedonia/Macedonia-the-Refugee-Emergency-164182>

12 Zoran Arbutina. Death along the Balkan route. 30 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/death-along-the-balkan-route/a-18421868>

13 Zoran Jordanovski. Humanitarna tragedija u Makedoniji. Deutsche Welle. August 21, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/hr/komentar-humanitarna-tragedija-u-makedoniji/a-18664679>

14 Macedonian President Ivanov explained that Macedonia is not a member of the EU, Schengen, or NATO, but still is forced to protect the EU from an EU member state (Greece), which is not doing its share of work. <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/ivanov-makedonija-placarske-evropske-unije/g4df3pe>

15 During the summer and fall 2015, Macedonian railways were earning approximately 100,000 EUR daily for the transportation of refugees. http://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=18&nav_id=1098256

16 In February 2016, Macedonian taxi drivers staged a five-day blockade of the railway transportation services, demanding their regular share of the transportation business. The blockade stopped only after an agreement with the government was reached. <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/Region/2197111/Taksisti+u+Makedoniji+oko+n%C4%8Dali+%C5%A1trajk,+slobodan+prolaz+za+izbeglice.html>

17 IOM Emergency Response Plan for Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. September – December 2015. pg. 1 Available at: https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country_appeal/file/IOM-European-Migration-Crisis-WB-Response-Plan-Appeal.pdf

been registered.¹⁸ Registration was done at the entry camp in Gevgelija, where shelter and basic humanitarian support was provided. The total number of police registrations between June 19 and December 7, 2015 was 317,507. As noted above, the amendment to the Law on Asylum technically meant that those who register are in fact expressing their intention to seek asylum in Macedonia. However, out of the 317,507 registrations, a mere 83 formal applications were submitted. Thus, Macedonia was and has been purely a transit country; all those entering were leaving just as quickly.

Accommodation

The camp at Gevgelija can host up to 1,920 people at any single moment, or 596 persons for a 24-hour stay. With the number of shelters that have been pledged, this number should increase to 812. The camp has places to rest, toilets, and water taps. Food is provided regularly by humanitarian organizations, while the Red Cross administers first aid.¹⁹

The Vinograd temporary centre in Gevgelija is equipped with services that include: access to information (Wi-Fi, information boards, feedback boxes and a loudspeaker system); protection services (legal counselling and information, child friendly spaces, psychosocial support and family reunification services); medical services (first aid and primary healthcare, a mobile van with gynaecological services, ambulance transport to nearby hospitals); material assistance (food and other items such as blankets, sleeping bags, winter clothes and dignity kits); WASH facilities (hot showers, toilets separated by gender, as well as those adjusted for people with disabilities and baby-bathing facilities). All of these services are provided at no cost to the refugees.²⁰

The camp at Tabanovce has a maximum capacity of 991 people in transit, or 356 people if sheltered for a 24-hour period (with pledged shelters, the number should increase to 510). It is equipped with similar services to those offered in Vinograd. In sum, the country is currently not prepared to accommodate people for longer periods. After the closure of the Western Balkan route, 1,171 persons were still stranded in Macedonia.²¹

18 At that time, more than half of all migrants were women and children. Refugee and migrant numbers and trends in FYROM, Serbia, and Croatia. Update from the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, Skopje. 9 December 2015

19 Welcome 2 Europe, Available at: <http://w2eu.info/macedonia/en/articles/macedonia-living.en.html>

20 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016, pg. 49

21 IOM Weekly Flows Compilation Report No. 10 Available at: <http://doe.iom.int/docs/Weekly%20Flows%20Combilation%20No%2010%2017%20Mar%20Final.pdf>

The migration route

The route from Greece's Idomeni transit centre to the Serbian border may be described as follows: Migrants walk from Idomeni to cross into Macedonia, where they eventually reach the Vinograd transit centre in Gevgelija. The distance is less than 1 kilometre. In Gevgelija, migrants wait for up to five hours for transportation to Tabanovce. Transportation to Tabanovce is organized by either train (4-5 hours), bus (3 hours) or taxi (2.5 hours). Trains can accommodate up to 400 persons. The price of transport is 25 EUR for all three modes of transportation. For children under ten, the train is free, while bus and taxi services offer half-price for children under seven. At Tabanovce, migrants usually stay a couple of hours before they continue their journey. Migrants of nationalities prohibited to cross the border usually remain in the centre for a period of 2-3 days. Migrants then walk two kilometres to Miratovac, which takes approximately 40 minutes along a muddy path with two streams and no bridges²² (for vulnerable groups, transportation is provided between both countries).²³

Political discourse

In light of Macedonia's political turmoil not associated with the migrant crisis, this particular issue did not register high on the daily agenda for politicians and, consequently, the media. In general, the VMRO-DMPNE government's response to the refugee crisis could be characterised as indifferent, if not openly hostile.

The primary political crisis in Macedonia, ongoing for several years, culminated in the spring of 2015 upon the release of wiretaps by the opposition party, which incriminated government officials of serious breach of law within a number of corruption scandals. The political situation further deteriorated in May 2015, when an Albanian militia, in a vague incident, infiltrated the town of Kumanovo allegedly to carry out terrorist attacks. Massive anti-government protests took place shortly thereafter.

The growing instability in Macedonia mobilized the EU to mediate an agreement between the government and the opposition. Over the summer, EU Commissioner Johannes Hahn, US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, and other European officials travelled to Skopje to negotiate peace between the two camps. An agreement, reached in September 2015, called for the election of a special

22 In March 2016, Macedonia began erecting a three-meter tall fence secured with barbed wire in the Tabanovce camp where, at the time, around 1,300 migrants remained stranded.

23 IOM Weekly Flows Compilation Report No. 4. Available at: <http://doe.iom.int/docs/WEEKLY%20Flows%20Compilation%20No4%204%20Feb%202016.pdf>

prosecutor to investigate illegal surveillance claims, the resignation of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in January 2016, and new elections in the spring of 2016. After initial setbacks, the special prosecutor and her team have finally commenced their investigation, and the prime minister resigned on January 15, 2016. However, because of ongoing problems with media freedom, voter lists and other issues, the date for a new election was delayed until June 2016.

As noted above, the refugee crisis garnered little attention, with the exception of Macedonia's decision to close its borders in August 2015, and again in March 2016, when clashes broke out between refugees and border guards.

The fact that Macedonia was the entry point to the Western Balkan route, politicians outspoken about slowing down the flow of migrants or closing the border entirely, were able to popularly distinguish themselves. As such, the operational capacity of the Macedonian government to control the border and act effectively upon brokered agreements with international bodies added to the legitimacy of the Gruevski government. While the refugee crisis did not assuage domestic political debate in Macedonia, it did provide the current government the possibility to score a few additional supporters among its public and abroad, despite criticism of its actions.²⁴

Media

In general, the Macedonian media, reflecting the government and public's relatively negative view of the migrants, was not empathetic to their cause. Balanced coverage was haphazard at best, particularly as primary focus was allotted to security concerns, e.g., the sheer numbers of daily arrivals, speculation as to their fate should Germany and Austria close their borders, and the fear of possible terrorists using the refugee crisis to enter Europe. As well, the media openly questioned why Macedonia should play the part of constructive European partner within the refugee crisis given the fact that the EU has—for years—blocked Macedonia's accession attempts.²⁵

In sum, however, such stories were largely drowned out by the media's daily coverage of inter-party bickering, and the international community's attempts to mediate Macedonia's domestic crisis.

Civil society

Local NGOs like the Red Cross, El-Hilal, Legis, Nun, and the Civic Initiative were among the first to address the plight of refugees passing through Macedonia on their way to the EU. They were stationed at the border with Greece and Serbia, and provided immediate assistance. Social media attention centred on a Facebook group called, "Help the migrants in Macedonia." Citizens donated food, clothing and other necessities. Religious organizations, including the Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, the Catholic and Protestant churches, also joined the effort. Local businesses provided donations, as well as the ICRC, and the UNHCR. Despite this good will, however, the fear remains that if high numbers of refugees continued to arrive, or if they were forced to stay in Macedonia, compassion would turn sour.²⁶

²⁴ Florian Bieber. Gruevski Does Not Deserve Any More Chances. Balkan Insight. June 23, 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/gruevski-does-not-deserve-any-more-chances>

²⁵ Gjorge Ivanov, President of Macedonia. Macedonia is defending Europe from itself. Comment, The Telegraph. March 6, 2016. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/macedonia/12185464/Macedonia-is-defending-Europe-from-itself.html>

²⁶ Sveto Toevski. Humanitarna kriza u Makedoniji. Deutsche Welle. August 22, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/hr/humanitarna-kriza-u-makedoniji/a-18665534>



General information

Like Macedonia, the exact number of transits through Serbia varies. While the European Parliament estimated some 596,000 entries in 2015,²⁷ the UNHCR counted 815,000.²⁸ According to the IOM, a total of 639,152 migrants transited through the country, beginning in early 2015 until February 2016.²⁹ In October and November 2015, Serbia averaged 6,500 daily entries.³⁰ Between January 1 and March 3, 2016, 89,180 transited through the country.³¹

Legislative framework

The relevant legislation in Serbia concerning refugees consists of the 2008 Laws on Asylum, Foreigners, and State Border Protection, the 2012 Law on Migration Management, and the 2014 Law on the Employment of Foreigners. As part of Serbia's framework for EU accession, asylum legislation has been identified as partially compliant with the EU acquis. In 2013, the Ministry of Interior initiated the formulation of a draft proposal for a new asylum law. Its adoption is expected in the first half

27 Velina Lylianova. Briefing January 2016. European Parliamentary Research Service. PE 573.949.

28 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016.

29 IOM Weekly Flows Compilation Report No. 4. Available at: <http://doe.iom.int/docs/WEEKLY%20Flows%20Compilation%20No4%204%20Feb%202016.pdf>

30 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016

31 IOM Weekly Flows Compilation Report No. 8. Available at: <http://doe.iom.int/docs/WEEKLY%20Flows%20Compilation%20No8%2003%20Mar%202016.pdf> Accessed on: 30.3.2016.

of 2016.³² However, the UNHCR still does not recommend Serbia to be considered a safe third country.³³

The 2008 Law on Asylum allows refugees to express their intent to apply for asylum, either at the border, or once inside Serbian territory. This affords them the right to stay legally in the country for a limited time period. The expression of intent is linked to the expectation that an asylum application will be submitted. Similar to Macedonia, few migrants actually followed through with a request for asylum. Of those who did submit the application, most left before a decision was rendered.

Since the border closed, however, the number of asylum applications has increased, totalling 693 in March 2016 (there were 19 applications on March 30 alone). The estimated number of refugees in Serbia during this month was 1,700.³⁴

Timeline

In May 2015, Serbia began to see an increasing number of migrants transiting through its territory. The initial route was the logical next stop after Greece and Macedonia; migrants would enter Serbia and continue their journey north towards the Schengen Area, i.e., Hungary. However, in July 2015, Hungary initiated construction of a fence along its border with Serbia, and as well introduced stricter criminal penalties for illegal border crossings. Over the summer, several incidents were reported at the border area between migrants and the Hungarian police. In one instance, police forces used teargas and water cannons against migrants despite the fact that they were on the Serbian side of the border, causing tensions to escalate between the two countries. The fence was completed on September 15, at which point the migration route was redirected from Hungary to Croatia. At the end of February 2016, with increased turmoil along the WB borders, Serbia called for all security forces to be on high alert, including its army. If the situation required, the Council for National Security, alongside the President of the Republic, would decide on whether to deploy the army. The Minister of Justice stated that all security forces were responsible for the protection of state borders.³⁵

32 Velina Lylianova. Briefing January 2016. European Parliamentary Research Service. PE 573.949

33 Observation on the Situation of the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection in Serbia. UNHCR. August 2012. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.rs/media/UNHCRSerbia-CountryofAsylumScreen.pdf>

34 UNHCR. Serbia Daily Update. March 30, 2016. Available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCRSerbiaDailyUpdate30March2016.pdf>

35 Kurir. Pripravnost na granicama: Srbija šalje vojsku na migrante. February 25, 2016. Available at: <http://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/pripravnost-na-granicama-srbija-salje-vojsku-na-migrante-klanak-2149007>

Registration

Refugee registrations were handled at the Preševo centre near the Macedonian border, where a number of problems were reported. In one example, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles reported that between September 30 and October 1, 2,600 migrants were registered in Preševo, despite the fact that 5,000 had actually arrived in the town on these days. They reported that the gap remained despite improved registration capacities.³⁶ It should be noted that over time, registration capacities improved, and as many as 8,000 refugees could be registered in a single day.³⁷

Accommodation

There are six operating centres in Serbia that can accommodate migrants during transit. The Miratovac transit entry point is located at the border with Macedonia, and can host between 300 and 500 people. The one-stop registration centre in Preševo is located approximately thirteen kilometres from the Macedonian border, and can accommodate up to 1,500 persons. In contrast, the Dimitrovgrad registration centre near the Bulgarian border has a maximum capacity of 140 persons. There are three more centres at the Croatian border: the one-stop centre at Šid Point (800 persons), the Principovac Transit Reception Center (250-300 persons), and the one-stop centre Adaševci (500 persons).³⁸ Serbia can currently provide temporary accommodations for 3,000-6,000 persons.³⁹ According to the Serbian Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Serbia did not prepare hosting migrants for longer periods of stay in the country.⁴⁰

The migration route

As noted above, migrants typically crossed into Serbia between Tabanovce (Macedonia) and Miratovac (Serbia). There are two other entry points at the border with Bulgaria: Dimirovgrad and Zaječar (whereupon they travel to Belgrade). From Miratovac, migrants were directed to Preševo, either by foot, minivan, or bus, which takes

between 15 and 30 minutes. From Preševo, they could go either to Belgrade or to the town of Šid along the Croatian border. Migrants travelling to Belgrade arrived either by train (11 hours/10 EUR) or by bus (5 hours/25 EUR). From Preševo to Šid, they could take a 12-hour train ride for 12 EUR, or a 6-hour bus ride for 20–30 EUR. However, only those registered could take the bus to Šid. For those awaiting registration, illegal taxis offered their services at a rate of 1,000 EUR.⁴¹ Once they arrived in Šid, a free train transport was organized to take them to the reception centre in Slavonski Brod, Croatia. In Šid, both Serbian and Croatian police units conducted separate screening processes; those who passed both were allowed to board the train to Slavonski Brod.⁴² Before this transport was organized on November 3, 2015, migrants crossed the border on foot at the Berkasovo/Bapska border crossing.

Political discourse

Among all the Western Balkan countries assessed in this report, the Serbian government has offered the most positive rhetoric towards the refugees. Refugee discourse centred on concepts like empathy, human solidarity, shared experience from the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and the responsibility functioning states and mature societies must assume. However, there was also a clear message that Serbia would not accept any burden alone; there were continued calls for a joint European solution.⁴³ One other issue may have also contributed to the overall amiability of the Serbian government to the refugee crisis. Serbia was named a candidate for EU membership in 2012, and negotiations, beginning in 2013, are ongoing. The first Serbia-EU intergovernmental conference was held in January 2014. Yet, as the opening of the first EU chapters was occurring at the time of the refugee crisis, Serbia, showing an aura of enlightened and legitimate self-interest, smartly adopted a constructive and sophisticated approach.⁴⁴

Early elections in Serbia were set for April 2016, and with the closure of the Western Balkan route, the migration issue has fallen from atop the political agenda.

36 European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Western Balkans News Brief: September 28 – October 2. Available at: <http://ecre.org/component/downloads/downloads/1049.html>

37 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016

38 IOM Weekly Flows Compilation Report No. 4. Available at: <http://doe.iom.int/docs/WEEKLY%20Flows%20Compilation%20No4%204%20Feb%202016.pdf>

39 UNHCR. The Balkan Migrant Crisis: an Introduction, pg. 6 Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=510>

40 <http://www.nacional.hr/novi-podaci-povecava-se-broj-migranata-na-sjeveru-vojvodine/>

41 European Council on Refugees and Exiles, Western Balkans News Brief: September 28 – October 2. Available at: <http://ecre.org/component/downloads/downloads/1049.html>

42 UNHCR Croatia. Interview. March 2016.

43 Serbian PM Vučić explained that Serbia would not become a hotspot for migrants, but would treat humanely those who happened to be unable to leave Serbian territory after the WB route was closed, March 9, 2016, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/zatvaranje-balkanske-rute-vucic-srbija-nece-biti-parking-za-migrante/j7hxxk/>

44 Serbia opened the first two chapters – 32 and 35 – on December 14, 2015.

Media

In contrast to Macedonia, the Serbian media generally underlined the humanitarian character of the refugee crisis, with focus often given to personal stories of migrant plight. As well, a number of outlets published stories of the inhumane conditions at the borders, particularly when border stops are closed, as well as detestable instances of smugglers and criminals taking advantage of refugees.⁴⁵ Broadly speaking, the Serbian media greatly empathized with people fleeing their homeland in search of security and improved living conditions.

Balancing out the empathy, there was also wide-coverage of the unfortunate domestic situation in Serbia. Debate ensued that Serbia is struggling with far too many of its own problems to be able to cater to the hundreds of thousands of unfortunate migrants.

Civil society

At the onset of the crisis, NGOs in Serbia immediately deployed aid to the transiting refugees. In terms of the broader public, there has been widespread solidarity with the migrants' misfortune. Donations flooded in from citizens, businesses, and local and international organizations.

The Asylum Protection Centre in Serbia expanded its work, and has mobilized hundreds of volunteers to provide legal assistance, psychological support, and protection of this vulnerable group. It is also engaged in fighting prejudice, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination against asylum seekers. Group 484, the Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre (NSHC), the Serbian Democratic Forum Belgrade (SDF), the International Aid Network (IAN), the Centre for Civil Society Development Protecta, as well as many others have been (even prior to the spring of 2015) engaged in working on issues related to refugees and migrants. International organizations like the UNHCR, the Red Cross, IOM, CRS, MSF and many others were also in the field.

45 Blic. Literally stuck in the mud, thousands of refugees went freezing in a camp in Greece, and in massive numbers, children were sick. March 10, 2016. Available at: <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/zaglavljenu-u-blatu-hiljade-izbeglica-se-smrzava-u-kampu-u-grckoj-decamasovno/1edskyy>

CROATIA



General information

Between September 16, 2015 and March 5, 2016, a total of 658,068 migrants⁴⁶ entered the territory of Croatia. On average, there were approximately 5,500 daily arrivals, with a peak of 11,000 on September 17.⁴⁷ Throughout January 2016, the average number of migrants entering Croatia varied between 500 and 2,000, with some days reaching 3,000.

Legislative framework

Until July 2, 2015, the right to asylum in Croatia was regulated by the Asylum Act. Due to the harmonization of national legislation with relevant EU directives, a new Act on International and Temporary Protection entered into force on July 2, 2015, and now forms the basis for asylum procedures in Croatia. The legislative framework for asylum in Croatia includes: the Law on the General Administrative Procedure, the Law on Administrative Disputes, the Law on Foreigners, the Law on Mandatory Health Insurance and Healthcare for Foreigners in the Republic of Croatia, and the Law on Free Legal Aid. However, despite having the relevant legislative framework in place, Croatia remains a transit country, as more than 80 percent of asylum seekers leave the country before their applications are processed.⁴⁸ As of March 24, 2016, only 178 intentions to request asylum were registered over the six-month crisis.⁴⁹ The introduction of restrictive measures in mid-February contributed to an increased number of intentions to apply

46 UNHCR Croatia. Interview. March 2016

47 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia data. Available at: <http://www.mup.hr/main.aspx?id=230152> (latest available information).

48 Jasna Barberić. Asylum in the Republic of Croatia. UNHCR (data refers to the period prior to the start of the immediate crisis).

49 UNHCR Croatia. Interview. March 2016

for asylum. Between the start of the crisis and February 16, 2016, 29 requests were filed; between February 16 and March 14, an additional 83 requests were received. In March, the new Croatian government proposed amendments that would allow the Croatian Armed Forces to support the police in protecting the border. According to the amendments, the decision to deploy the Armed Forces would be made by the government upon the recommendation of the Minister of Defence, and with the prior consent of the President of the Republic.⁵⁰ Migrants entering Croatia have the right to seek asylum. Should they chose this option, their fingerprints are taken and they are transferred to centres in Kutina or Porin. Those who do not request asylum are issued a 'decision of return,' and—until the route was closed—managed to continue their journey west.

Timeline

The migration crisis in Croatia began on September 16, the day after Hungary sealed its border with Serbia. Unable to manage the sudden massive inflows, Croatia closed all border crossings with Serbia on September 20, and in the process, halted all cargo traffic. Serbia responded by closing its border to Croatian goods. Croatia responded by closing its border to cars with Serbian license plates and to Serbian citizens. The tit-for-tat lasted several days, whereupon the bans were lifted and relations normalized. At the onset of the crisis, Croatia directed migrants to the Hungarian border, causing one incident where a train full of migrants and armed Croatian police officers crossed the Hungarian border unannounced (according to Hungary). On October 16, Hungary erected a fence along its border with Croatia, thus blocking the inflow of migrants from their detour through Croatia. From there on, migrants were directed to Slovenia.

In November, a new winter reception centre was built, and an agreement reached between Serbia and Croatia to transport migrants directly from Šid (Serbia) to Slavonski Brod (Croatia) by train. On December 10, the European Commission adopted an infringement procedure against Croatia (as well as Greece, Italy, Malta, and Hungary) for failing to fully transpose and implement the Common European Asylum System. More specifically, the Commission urged Croatia, Greece, and Italy to correctly implement the Eurodac regulation, which provides for the effective fingerprinting of asylum seekers and the transmission of requisite data to the Eurodac Central System within 72-hours.⁵¹ On November 18, the government of Slovenia requested the readmission of non-war refugees back to Croatia. The Croatian government

50 Draft proposal of amendments to the Law on Defence. Available at: <https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Sjednice/2016/6%20sjednica%20vlade/6%20-%201b.pdf>

51 European Commission Press Release. December 10, 2015. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6276_en.htm

countered by notifying their counterparts in Belgrade and Skopje that it will no longer receive migrants from countries other than Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Afterward, the number of daily arrivals fell below 3,000.⁵²

Registration

At the beginning of the crisis, migrants were received at the Ježevo registration centre near Zagreb. However, due to the swelling numbers, the police stopped recording the entry of migrants in the area of Tovarnik, and transport was organized to registration centres in Čepin, Ježevo, Beli Manastir, Luč, Torjanci, Sisak, and Zagreb.⁵³ On September 20, the construction of a temporary reception centre commenced in Opatovac, where registrations took place until the WRTC in Slavonski Brod was ready for operation.

Accommodation

In the first days of the crisis, arrivals were housed on an ad hoc basis in centres for asylum seekers in Zagreb and Kutina. In a matter of hours, the centres reached capacity, and the city of Tovarnik was filled with migrants sitting on the ground, waiting for a train to be transported further. A temporary reception centre opened on September 20 in Opatovac, which could accommodate temporarily 4000-5000 people. On November 3, the Winter Reception and Transit Centre opened in Slavonski Brod, which could host 5000 migrants, as well as provide organized care for migrants in transit. Services included restoring family links, health protection and emergency treatment, and protection and care for the unaccompanied and separated children. In addition, safety and security, warehousing capacities, and regular centre maintenance were provided. Focus was given to identifying and assisting individuals at-risk, as well as those with specific needs. The Croatian Red Cross provided a 24-hour tracing service, alongside the permanent presence of a trained social worker. Medical services were provided by the national health system, and UNICEF opened a child-friendly space.⁵⁴

When the Western Balkan route closed on March 9, new migrants did not arrive from Serbia but 270 persons were returned from Slovenia. Some requested asylum in Croatia. The number of asylum applications increased over the following two weeks, and as of March 30, 2016, there were 161 persons in Slavonski Brod. Many of the

52 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January–December 2016

53 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Croatia. Presentation of the overview of migration crisis in Croatia. Available at: http://www.mup.hr/UserDocsImages/topvijesti/2015/listopad/MIGRATION_CRISIS_CRO_OVERVIEW.pdf

54 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016

applicants have already left Croatia as their application allowed them to move to an open reception centre, whereupon they could freely move elsewhere.

The migration route

When the first massive wave of migrants arrived in September, there were a number of difficulties in the organization of transport and accommodation. Migrants were primarily crossing the border on foot at Tovarnik and Bapska, and were then transported by trains or buses to various reception points in the country. From Croatia, migrants were first directed to Hungary and subsequently to Slovenia. The situation stabilised in November, as migrants now boarded a train in Šid, Serbia, which brought them directly to the WRTC in Slavonski Brod, free-of-charge. A distance of 120 kilometres, the ride takes between 2 and 3 hours. With an average daily inflow of 1,700 refugees, registration periods generally lasted up to 3 hours. The centre could accommodate migrants for periods of 24-48 hours. From Slavonski Brod, migrants were taken to Sibirj, where they boarded trains or buses for the 230 kilometre voyage (4-6 hours) to either Dobova or Mursko Središće (both in Slovenia), free-of-charge.⁵⁵

Political discourse

Simultaneous to the start of the crisis, Croatia was preparing for parliamentary elections in November 2015. The Social Democratic government, headed by then-Prime Minister Zoran Milanović, framed the crisis inside both the need to take a humane approach, and as well, protect the country's national security interests. Minister of Interior Ostojić routinely travelled to the field in the fall and winter of 2015, overseeing the situation and briefing journalists and foreign officials daily. With the election looming, the government needed to show that it was capable of controlling the crisis; any failure could have been easily exploited by the opposition. The migration issue quickly began to dominate the political agenda, and was explained along the following lines: Croatia would do its share of work, would contribute to the orderly and humane transit of migrants across its territory, but would not allow itself to become a haven for migrants, a prospect feared and vociferously criticised by the opposition.

Unlike parliament, President Grabar-Kitarović, spoke primarily in terms of security concerns created by the large influx of migrants in the country. She continually called for the use of the army to protect the country's borders, a

proposal the Prime Minister repeatedly rejected.⁵⁶

Croatia's priority was to organize the smooth transit of migrants across its territory. It was the first to organize state-funded transportation. Here, the government wanted to show that Croatia had both the responsibility and capacity to assist refugees, that it could humanely provide food, temporary shelter, and medical assistance. Underneath, however, there was understanding that the free transportation of refugees would leave them little opportunity to wander away from reception centres. Except for those living close to these centres, there was little contact among citizens and refugees. Thus, for the majority of Croatians, refugees were only visible on television and other media.

The opposition strongly criticized the government for its alleged failure to find an agreement with neighboring Slovenia and Hungary, which damaged relations and prevented the possibility of finding a joint solution. In the end, the Milanović government lost the elections; however, the overall sentiment is that the election outcome was not decided by the refugee crisis.

The new coalition government, led by Prime Minister Orešković, has retained a similar discourse of responsibility and humanity in handling the refugee crisis; however, it has been more vocal about the need for Croatia to first and foremost protect itself, a message in-line with the Office of the President.

Media

Overall, the Croatian media responded positively to the refugees and migrants. On almost a daily basis, newspaper and television reports detailed personal accounts of fleeing people, their misfortune, and their experiences along the route to Europe. As well, the media was drawn to stories about how refugees were treated in Croatia, with sentiments drawing back to the experiences of many Croatians in the 1990s.

Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, and the reports of harassment by migrants in Cologne on New Year's Eve, some media outlets began to amplify security concerns brought about by the flood of refugees. Still, there has been a clear effort to show that not all migrants are terrorists and sexual offenders. In sum, however, the overall positive tone characterising the first days of the crisis, has diminished.

55 IOM Weekly Flows Compilation Report No. 4. Available at: <http://doe.iom.int/docs/WEEKLY%20Flows%20Compilation%20No4%204%20Feb%202016.pdf>

56 The debate continued after the elections. In March 2016 the new conservative government proposed amendments to the Law on Defence opening a possibility for army deployment at the borders and its use in other emergency situations. The opposition and activists strongly criticized draft proposals.

Civil society

A number of local NGOs had been active in helping refugees before they arrived in Croatia. Donations were collected for refugees in Serbia and Macedonia. Such efforts only increased once they entered Croatia. Citizens tended to show solidarity by offering food, clothing, blankets, and other necessities. Some offered to drive refugees at no cost to the Slovenian border before the government assumed full control of their transportation. The Centre for Peace Studies, alongside a number of civic organizations, launched the Welcome! Initiative, an advocacy platform, as well as networks to provide information and assistance to refugees and volunteers. The information is given in Croatian, English, German, and Arabic, and is updated regularly.⁵⁷

Civil society organizations warned Croatians and refugees about various human rights violations that may occur along the route. Moreover, they called attention to the arguably arbitrary decisions made over which migrants were allowed to continue their journey and those who were returned to Croatia. As well, they called attention to rights violations against non-Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis. They further warned about violations that regularly occurred against detainees in Slavonski Brod, who were issued a decision to leave the European Economic Area. Finally, they have taken issue with the still-undeclared destiny of those stranded in Slavonski Brod following the closure of the route.⁵⁸

In March 2016, when amendments to the Law on Defence were announced, the Welcome! Initiative, the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence, and Human Rights in Osijek, Miramida, and other organizations protested under the slogan: 'Stop the wars, not the people fleeing wars.'⁵⁹

SLOVENIA



General information

When Hungary sealed its border with Croatia, the massive influx of migrants was rerouted to Slovenia. The Ministry of Interior began registering migrants on October 16, and by the end of 2015, more than 378,000 transits had been recorded.⁶⁰ The European Parliament estimates that through mid-January 2016, approximately 408,000 persons passed through Slovenia.⁶¹ Like the other countries along the Western Balkan route, few refugees viewed Slovenia as anything more than a transit hub. Since September 2015, only 144 have applied for asylum. In the first days of the crisis, there were high discrepancies between the number of arrivals and departures from the country. The Slovenian police explained that no data was kept on the number of migrants leaving for Austria; some left the centres on their own, and those who were in transit to the centres at the time of data collection, were not added to the count.⁶²

Legislative framework

On 20 October 2015, the Government of Slovenia approved amendments to the Defence Act which define new tasks for the Slovenian armed forces under strictly specified conditions.⁶³ The Act was adopted by the Parliament the next day through a 66:5 vote. It allows the Armed Forces to engage in the protection of the state border through

57 More about Welcome! Initiative at <http://welcome.cms.hr/index.php/en/about/>

58 Are You Serious, Welcome Initiative. 'Report on Systemic Human Rights Violations by the Croatian Authorities in the Closed Parts of the Winter and Transit Reception Centre in Slavonski Brod. Available at: http://cms.hr/system/article_document/doc/261/Report_on_Systemic_Human_Rights_Violations_in_the_Winter_Reception_and_Transit_Centre_in_Slavonski_Brod.pdf; Report on Systemic Police Violence and Push-Backs against non-SIA People Conducted by Croatian Authorities. Available at: http://cms.hr/system/article_document/doc/242/Report-Police-Violence-and-Push-Backs.pdf

59 More at <http://welcome.cms.hr/index.php/en/2016/03/03/du-to-announcement-on-amending-the-law-on-state-border-control-stop-the-wars-not-the-people-who-are-fleeing-wars/>

60 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016

61 Velina Lylianova. Briefing January 2016. European Parliamentary Research Service. PE 573.949

62 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <http://www.policija.si/eng/index.php/component/content/article/13-news/1753-police-work-during-the-intensified-security-situation-caused-by-the-escalating-migrant-crisis-in-recent-weeks-explanations-and-answers>

63 Government of the Republic of Slovenia. Press Release. Available at: http://www.vlada.si/en/media_room/government_press_releases/press_release/article/government_adopts_urgent_measures_to_control_and_limit_the_migration_influx_56590/

awarding it powers to restrict movement of migrants until the arrival of the police as well as the crowd management. These may be performed in the border area independently and without police presence, but in line with the police plans.⁶⁴ The Government explained the amendment was adopted in the context of the massive entry through the Slovenian border the previous days, as a preventive measure. On 19 October 8.000 migrants entered Slovenia with only 2.000 leaving to Austria.

In mid-November, when the migration crisis was reaching its peak in Slovenia, the police union initiated a slow-down strike, demanding pay raises and other benefits.⁶⁵ PM Cerar criticized the unions for being irresponsible; namely, that they chose to organize a strike at a time when tensions were extremely high throughout Europe, and there was a palpable fear that a police strike may reflect negatively on the overall security situation in the country, particularly at its borders.⁶⁶ The existing laws regulating the police, however, limit strike activities, and oblige police officers to carry out all urgent security tasks. The strike continued in the following months, despite the impossibility of a solution to be reached with the government; however, it should be noted that there was no immediate effect on the security situation created by the refugee crisis either.

Timeline

Migrants began entering Slovenia after Hungary closed its border with Serbia, and the entire Western Balkan route was redirected through Croatia. However, in the first couple of weeks of the crisis, Croatia directed migrants back to Hungary. The massive inflow to Slovenia started only after Hungary erected a fence along its Croatian border, a moment which Slovenia refers to as 'the second migration wave.' Railway passenger traffic with Croatia was suspended the following day. A week into the second wave, Slovenia requested material and technical assistance from the international community, both bilaterally as well as through the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.⁶⁷ Unable to cope with the continuous inflow of persons, Slovenia began construction of a wire fence

along its border with Croatia on November 11, 2015.⁶⁸ This decision further heightened already tense relations between the two countries. Croatia claimed that Slovenia's fence had been partially erected on Croatian territory, rekindling the longstanding and sensitive border dispute between the two. Over time, as inflow pressures reduced, relations improved. On November 27, Austria began installing physical obstacles along its border with Slovenia. In late November, the countries along the route began limiting the number of migrants entering their territory by allowing passage only to Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans.

Registration

During the initial phase of the crisis, multiple entry points were used; however, since November 2015, entry and registration was organized around a single point in Dobova, where migrants were assisted by the Administration for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief. The registration process entailed a security examination and an identification procedure. If a migrant held a document, the data was entered into official police records. In cases of no documentation, the recorded data was based on what was told by the migrant. Migrants were verified through police records, which includes verification by the Schengen Information System. Migrants were then photographed, and those older than sixteen fingerprinted. In cases when many migrants were entering at the same time, a simplified registration procedure took place; information was collected manually and subsequently entered into the computer system without photographs or fingerprints.⁶⁹ Following registration, the migrants were issued a permission to stay in accordance with the Aliens Act.⁷⁰

Accommodation

In the first weeks of the crisis, migrants were transported by police in buses to various reception centres in the country (Brežice, Dobova, Livarna, and Gruškovje). Since October, all trains entering Slovenia at Rigonce exited at Jesenice or Šentilj along the Austrian border. If the number of arrivals

64 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <http://www.policija.si/eng/index.php/component/content/article/13-news/1753-police-work-during-the-intensified-security-situation-caused-by-the-escalating-migrant-crisis-in-recent-weeks-explanations-and-answers>

65 STA. Police start general strike. The Slovenia Times. November 18, 2015. <http://www.sloveniatimes.com/police-start-general-strike>

66 Marija Novak. Slovenia says police strike won't affect security. Reuters. November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovenia-strike-idUSKCN0719820151118>

67 Government of the Republic of Slovenia. Report on the activities related to the acceptance of migrants from 15.10.2015 to 8.12.2015. Available at: http://www.vlada.si/fileadmin/dokumenti/si/sklepi/seje_vlade_gradiva/VRS-migrant2-3_20.68mnz.pdf

68 Reuters. Slovenia starts building fence to control flow of refugees. November 11, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/11/slovenia-fence-refugees-veliki-obrez>

69 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <http://www.policija.si/eng/index.php/component/content/article/13-news/1753-police-work-during-the-intensified-security-situation-caused-by-the-escalating-migrant-crisis-in-recent-weeks-explanations-and-answers>

70 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <http://www.policija.si/eng/index.php/component/content/article/13-news/1753-police-work-during-the-intensified-security-situation-caused-by-the-escalating-migrant-crisis-in-recent-weeks-explanations-and-answers>

exceeded the system's capacities, and processing could not be completed in Dobova, migrants were transported to transit facilities at Gruškovje, Gornja Radgona, or Šentilj for registration and access to services, primarily medical care, prior to departing for Austria.⁷¹

Currently, Slovenia can accommodate 7,000 persons for short periods, and 2,000 for longer periods of time.⁷² At the registration centres, movement is generally not restricted, and the migrants are provided with basic care, i.e., food, clothing, and emergency medical care. The Slovenian Armed Forces prepared daily cooked meals, with additional food parcels distributed by humanitarian organizations.⁷³ The Red Cross was responsible for providing help with family reunification.⁷⁴ Healthcare centres from regions closest to the various reception centres were responsible for providing medical treatment.

Accommodation centres include the tent camp-car park at the former Šentilj border crossing, the fairgrounds at Gornja Radgona, the tent camp at Integral's former parking lot in Lendava, the Celje fairgrounds, the now-closed 26 October barracks in Vrhnika, the Logatec facility, and the Centre for Foreigners in Postojna.

The migration route

Migrants entered Dobova by train or bus from Slavonski Brod, Croatia, where a temporary registration facility was established. The average registration time (from the end of February to the beginning of March) was six hours. Transportation, as noted above, was free and took approximately 4-5 hours. Once in Dobova, migrants headed directly to the reception area, where they were registered and provided with necessary assistance. Beginning in late October, migrants then boarded a second train after the registration process, which took them to temporary accommodation centres.⁷⁵ Since October, all

trains entering Slovenia at Rigonce exited the country at Jesenice or Šentilj on their way to Austria at Spielfeld or Villach.⁷⁶ Here again, transport was free-of-charge.

Political discourse

Unlike Serbia and Croatia, Slovenian politicians focused primarily on the security dimension and organizational issues related to migration. Moreover, and in contrast to the discourse in Macedonia, the issue of migration was not ignored, rather it was atop the daily agenda even before the first wave of migrants arrived in Slovenia.

Discourse centred on the threat to Slovenia if Austria and Germany chose to close their borders, which would have left thousands of migrants stranded in Slovenia. For a small country of only two million people, Slovenia feared accepting a disproportional burden.

Moreover, as a member of the Schengen Area, Slovenia repeatedly reminded others to respect Schengen rules and establish quality control along their borders. It criticized Croatia for acting without consultation and disregarding Slovenian requests for imposing a daily entry quota of refugees. Slovenians claimed that Croatia simply "dumped" refugees at the Slovenian border.⁷⁷ Slovenia requested a daily maximum of 2,500 refugees to cross into the country, while Croatia proposed 5,000.⁷⁸

As waves of migrants continued to pour in, Slovenia adopted measures that allowed for its army to be deployed to the border,⁷⁹ announced that it would employ private security firms to help manage the flow of refugees,⁸⁰ and requested EU assistance.⁸¹

Confronted with what it regarded as an uncontrollable situation that it could no longer manage, Prime Minister Cerar, in a dramatic tone, initiated an emergency meeting

71 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016

72 UNHCR. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe: Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. January – December 2016

73 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <http://www.policija.si/eng/index.php/component/content/article/13-news/1753-police-work-during-the-intensified-security-situation-caused-by-the-escalating-migrant-crisis-in-recent-weeks-explanations-and-answers>

74 Government of the Republic of Slovenia. Flyer for migrants. Available at: http://www.vlada.si/fileadmin/dokumenti/si/projekti/2015/begunci/dokumenti/letak_begunci_ANG_ARAB.pdf

75 Nacional. Novi sustav registracija migranata u Sloveniji – Ljubljana hvali suradnju s Hrvatskom. Available at: <http://www.nacional.hr/novi-sustav-registracija-migranata-u-sloveniji-ljubljana-hvali-suradnju-s-hrvatskom/>

76 Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Slovenia. Press Release. October 28, 2015. Available at: http://www.mnz.gov.si/en/media_room/news/article/12137/9459/bac18c8edd426dd5b83f194734a6655c/

77 Slovenian PM Cerar explained that tension on the Slovenian-Croatian border resulted from the large number of refugees which Slovenia cannot admit. October 19, 2015. Available at: <http://www.jutarnji.hr/dramaticna-situacija-s-izbjeglicama--kako-dalje-slovenija--prestala-prihvacati-izbjeglice--tisuce-pred--granicama--pale-deke-da-se-ugriju/1440773/>

78 Jess McHugh. Refugee Crisis Europe Update 2015: Balkans Route Continues To Narrow in Slovenia. International Business Times. October 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/refugee-crisis-europe-update-2015-balkans-route-continues-narrow-slovenia-2145555>

79 AFP. Refugee crisis: Slovenia calls in army to help patrol borders. October 21, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/slovenia-calls-in-army-refugee-crisis-borders-eu-rope>

80 Reuters. Slovenia to hire private security firms to manage migrants flows. October 26, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/26/slovenia-private-security-firms-manage-migrant-flows-refugees>

81 Deutsche Welle. Slovenia asks for EU help to tackle refugee crisis. October 22, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/slovenia-asks-for-eu-help-to-tackle-refugee-crisis/a-18798930>

on October 25, 2015, citing that, "If we don't find a solution today, if we don't do everything we can today, then it is the end of the European Union as such."⁸²

Media

Like politicians, the Slovenian media focused mainly on the security dimension of the migration crisis. A wide number of reports suggested that migrants may pose a significant threat to the stability and prosperity of a small country like Slovenia. Moreover, media outlets debated the challenge, cost, and uncertain outcome of the migrant's integration in European society. One author characterized the media's reporting as: "racist hate speech (which) permeates the public discourse, and a state of paranoia prevails."⁸³ Parallel to the media questioning the rationale of allowing hundreds of thousands of refugees in Europe, many outlets also cited the need to find a common European solution, whereby Slovenia could be a constructive actor, and assume its fair share of the burden.

Civil society

As in other countries along the Western Balkan route, NGOs in Slovenia quickly organized and dispersed workers to the field. They created a Facebook page, "Refugees, Welcome to Slovenia" with information for refugees and volunteers.⁸⁴ Donations were collected and advocacy activities supported. The Peace Institute in Ljubljana, a flagship institution for migration issues, continues to be a focal point for information related to migrations. Not only is information disseminated to refugees and Slovenians alike, but as well the institution probes discourse on racism, populism, and discrimination.⁸⁵

RELATIONS BETWEEN COUNTRIES ON WB ROUTE

Though each country along the Western Balkan route was affected individually, the refugee crisis dramatically impacted relations among them. Initially, the crisis heightened fears that the lack of cooperation would strain already precarious relations among neighbours. The region, as a whole, continues to struggle with the legacies of the 1990s. Moreover, there is a shared lack of trust within a number of open bilateral issues, as well as challenges related to internal economic development, and the improvement of democratic standards. Among the four countries, Slovenia is member of the Schengen zone, both Slovenia and Croatia are EU member states, while Serbia and Macedonia are candidate countries. This status disparity has surely impacted policymaking. Yet despite these differences, the most important factor affecting relations was the geographical proximity to the crisis. In short, they were all in the same situation: hundreds of thousands of refugees were crossing their territories onwards to Western Europe. No statistically significant number of refugees intended to stay in any of their territories, EU or not, and none of these countries actually wanted the migrants to stay.

That fact that all were merely a transit point along a much longer route created a sense of shared understanding. This, however, did not change the fact that (in the beginning) there were cross-border accusations, different interpretations, reproach, and distrust. Each feared the worst case scenario: Germany and Austria border closures would leave them the burden of caring for hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Macedonia, as the entry point of the Western Balkan route, complained that it was not in a position to cater to EU policy demands, particularly as Macedonian accession to the EU has been blocked for years. The VMRO-DPMNE government, fighting its own domestic battle for political survival, pragmatically used Macedonia's position in the migration crisis to generate assistance, both financial and political, from the EU. Further, a number of critics charged the EU with being more worried about stability than democracy.⁸⁶

On the other side of the fence, Greece criticized the border closures, particularly the last one occurring March 9, 2016, which put it in the unenviable position of caring for tens of thousands of migrants in quite appalling conditions. In another episode, the Greek migration minister referred to Macedonia by the name "Macedonia," rather than FYROM, which created significant uproar in Greece; a coalition member of the government even called for his resignation over the gaffe.⁸⁷

82 Reuters. Slovenia Prime Minister Warns Refugee Crisis Could Tear Apart European Union. October 25, 2015. Available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/slovenia-premier-refugee-crisis-threatens-eu-387122>

83 Klemen Ploštajner. Long Sceptical of Foreigners, Slovenia Struggles to Navigate the Refugee Crisis. Open Society Foundations. December 18, 2015. Available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/long-skeptical-foreigners-slovenia-struggles-navigate-refugee-crisis>

84 Check at <https://www.facebook.com/refugees.slovenia/>

85 More at <http://www.mirovni-institut.si/en/about-the-peace-institute/>

86 Edit Herzog. Europe can't afford to be blackmailed by Macedonia. Politico. 21 March 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/europe-blackmailed-macedonia-refugee-crisis-balkan-route-greece/>

87 Reuters. Greek migration minister urged to resign over 'Macedonia' blunder. 16 March 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-minister-macedonia-idUSKCN0WIOZY>

Greece and Germany, in a rare act of unity, criticized plans to stem the migration influx. Ultimately, the decision was made on February 24 in Vienna by Austria and the Western Balkan countries to close their borders; Greece was not invited.⁸⁸ Angered, Greece recalled its ambassador from Vienna the following day, and threatened to block EU Council decisions if member states are not allowed to participate proportionately in the relocation and resettlement of refugees.⁸⁹ Austria dramatically framed the refugee crisis as a direct challenge to the survival of the EU, while Greece focused on unjust criticism of its frontline role in handling the crisis.

Short of a European solution, countries along the WB route, together with Austria, decided to close their borders. Holding substantial political clout in the Western Balkans, Austria hosted a meeting where a joint declaration on a comprehensive approach was adopted.⁹⁰ Austria and others dismissed German criticism over this policy overhaul, noting that migrations pressures on Germany would also diminish.⁹¹ The EU-Turkey agreement reached on March 18, 2016 promised a comprehensive solution,⁹² although a number of politicians have expressed reservations about its eventual implementation. Further, human rights organization have voiced concerns that safeguards for protecting asylum seekers would unlikely be fully observed.⁹³

The restoration of amicable relations between neighbouring Croatia and Serbia was under genuine strain in the first days of the crisis. The redirection of the migration route from Serbia to Croatia in September 2015 created new tensions, and for the first time since the end of the war in 1995, the border was closed between the two countries. Croatia blamed Serbia (and Hungary) for directing migrants only to Croatia, after which Croatia blocked cargo traffic and denied entry to all vehicles registered in Serbia. Subsequently, Serbia introduced countermeasures blocking entrance to all Croatian goods. Media outlets on both sides went viral. Serbian tabloids ran sensational headlines like:

88 Nikolaj Nielsen. Austria plans Western Balkan meeting on migrant caps. EU Observer. 22 February 2016, <https://euobserver.com/migration/132377>

89 Helena Smith and Ian Traynor. Greece recalls ambassador from Austria over EU refugees flow. The Guardian. 25 February 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/greece-wont-be-lebanon-of-europe-yannis-mouzalas-refugees-eu>

90 Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, Republic of Austria. 24 February 2016, <http://www.bmi.gv.at/cms/cs-03documentsbmi/1813.pdf>

91 Giogos Christidis et al. Refugee Crisis Disunity: A De Facto Solution Takes Shape in the Balkans. Spiegel Online. 26 February 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/european-response-to-refugee-crisis-fracturing-a-1079547.html>

92 Press Release. EU and Turkey agree on European response to refugee crisis. European Commission. 19 March 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/news/2016/03/20160319_en.htm

93 Jennifer Rankin. EU-Turkey deal to return refugees from Greece comes into force. The Guardian. 20 March 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/18/refugees-will-be-sent-back-across-aegean-in-eu-turkey-deal>

“The Croatian prime minister is an idiot” and “A lunatic is leading Croats into a war.”⁹⁴

The German chancellor warned rather grimly of a potential chain reaction of violence and war in the Balkans if the refugee crisis was not tamed.⁹⁵ However, the refugee crisis did not create friction only in the Western Balkans. The same crisis signalled deep rifts within the EU as well. Tensions and distrust marked the March 2016 EU Council meeting, where the EU-Turkey agreement was adopted. Germany, the primary architect behind the plan with Turkey, soon found itself without many allies, as a number of member states began to gravitate toward the Eastern European answer to the refugee crisis.⁹⁶

Relations have improved among all four Western Balkan countries over the course of several months, particularly as they have begun to share information, open lines of communication and, in general, better coordinate plans and policy to deal with migrants. However, tensions remained elevated so long as a high number of migrants continued to seek transit through the region. As late as March 2016, the Macedonian foreign minister warned that the refugee crisis could lead neighbours back into violent conflict.⁹⁷ The closure of the borders on March 9, 2016, in anticipation of the EU-Turkey agreement,⁹⁸ may have temporarily quelled neighbourly frictions; however, should a migration route resurface in the Western Balkans, so too will the region’s historic wounds.⁹⁹

94 N1 TV. September 24, 2015. Available at: <http://hr.n1info.com/a74462/Svijet/Regija/Srpski-tabloidi-Banda-ustaska-Milanovic-je-lud-idiot.html>

95 Adam Withnall. Refugee influx could spark ‘military conflict’ in Balkans, Angela Merkel warns. Independent. November 3, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-influx-could-spark-military-conflict-in-balkans-angela-merkel-warns-a6719521.html>

96 Spiegel Staff. Alone in Berlin: How Merkel Has Gambled Away Her EU Power. Spiegel Online. 11 March 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/refugee-crisis-policies-have-merkel-on-defensive-in-europe-a-1081820.html>

97 Blic. March 1, 2016, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/makedonski-ministar-upozorava-zbog-izbeglica-moze-doci-do-sukoba-medu-susedima/mpcgqrd>

98 Stelios Bouras. Balkan Countries Completely Seal Off Migrant Trail as Part of EU Plan. The Wall Street Journal. 9 March 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/macedonia-completely-closes-border-with-greece-to-migrants-1457521754>

99 In a comprehensive report, “Regional refugee and migrant response plan for Europe. Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan route” for the period January – December 2016, the UNHCR created a detailed list of activities and measures to be undertaken to respond to the migration pressures in 2016, http://rmrp-europe.unhcr.org/2016_RMRP_Europe.pdf

Appendix

Table 1. Erected fences

BORDER	TYPE	DATE
Bulgaria - Turkey	160 km long, 4.5 m high, 1.5 m wide razor wire fence	April 2015
Hungary - Serbia	4 m high; double security fence (outer: razor wire, inner: sturdy barrier); along the 175 km border	September 2015
Hungary - Croatia	Extension of fence with Serbia	October 2015
Macedonia - Greece	3.5 m high razor-topped fence, length: 30 km	November 2015; February 2016
Slovenia - Croatia	1.8 m high barbed-wire fence across land border with Croatia	November 2015
Austria - Slovenia	3.7 km long, 2.2. m high metal fence (only at the main border crossings with Slovenia)	December 2015
Sweden - Denmark	A temporary fence to ease border control erected between domestic and international tracks at Hyllie station in Southern Malmo, Sweden	January 2016

Table 2. Introduced border controls

BORDER CONTROLS	
September 2015	Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Netherlands
October 2015	Hungary (to Slovenia)
November 2015	France, Norway
January 2016	Sweden, Denmark

Table 3. Financial assistance
March 2016, authors' compilation.*

FUNDS (IN EUROS)	EU							CEB
	ECHO	EU Commission / IPA	AMIF	ISF	PROGRESS			
MACEDONIA	July 2015: 90 000	March 2016: 10 MIL for border control	-	-			2.2 MIL to improve living conditions in reception centers	
	Aug 2015: 1.5 MIL emergency humanitarian response	October 2015: 17 MIL (10 MIL out of IPA II special measure; 7 MIL humanitarian aid which is a part of the EC's commitment to allocate a further 200 MIL to deal with the refugee crisis)	-	-				
	Oct 2015: 8.5 MIL support to refugees	March 2016: 8 MIL IPA II Programme 'Regional support to protection and sensitive migration management in the Western Balkans and Turkey'						
SERBIA	Aug 2015: 150 000		-	-	Sept 2015: 237 000, EU and SIDA, Preševo reception centre Feb 2016: 171 000, EU and SDC, Preševo reception centre		2.3 MIL to improve living conditions in reception centers	
CROATIA	-	-	12.436 MIL	3.995 MIL			-	
SLOVENIA	-	-	5.256 MIL	4.918 MIL			-	

*The table does not include non-financial, in-kind contributions received. In case of Serbia and Macedonia, the stated figures are in addition to the overall EU pre-accession migration related activities, which amount to 54 MIL EUR and 24 MIL EUR, respectively.

Abbreviations:

AL – Albania
AMIF – Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
AT – Austria
BG – Bulgaria
CEB – The Council of Europe Development Bank
CRS – Catholic Relief Service
DE – Germany
ECHO – EU Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection
EIB – European Investment Bank
EP – European Parliament
EU – European Union
FYROM – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GR – Greece
HR – Croatia
HU – Hungary
ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM – International Organization for Migration
IPA – Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
ISF – The Internal Security Fund (European Union)
MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MK – Macedonia
MoI – Ministry of Interior
MSF – Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO – Non-governmental organization
PM – Prime Minister
PROGRESS – EC programme, Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
RO – Romania
RS – Serbia
SDC – Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SI – Slovenia
SIDA – Swedish international Development Cooperation Agency
TR – Turkey
UNHCR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VMRO-DPMNE – The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
WB – Western Balkans
WRTC – Winter Reception and Transition Centre

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