

A rising wave of refugees in Bulgaria

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According to the Bulgarian deputy prime minister and interior minister Tsvetlin Yovchev, from January to the end of September this year the number of illegal immigrants detained at the Bulgarian border increased sevenfold in comparison to the same period of time last year, and totalled 5815 people. In September alone 2400 people were detained, of whom 70% were Syrians, coming mainly from Turkey. Bulgaria has no legal possibilities to send them back as Ankara has not ratified the readmission agreement with the EU; the Turkish government has made this move dependent on the liberalisation of the visa system for Turkish citizens. According to the State Agency for Refugees the number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria in the first three quarters of this year reached nearly 4000 (which represents an almost threefold increase on the same period of time last year), out of whom over half are Syrians. Due to a sharp increase in the number of refugees and difficulties in ensuring them adequate conditions, Bulgaria called on the EU for additional financial assistance in mid-September. The refugee issue has also triggered a heated public debate in Bulgaria.

Commentary

- Although Bulgaria is an EU border country, recent months have proven that the country is ill-prepared to deal with migration pressures. Bulgaria lacks qualified personnel and effective measures to process asylum applications. All the existing refugee centres are packed, and those who escape are placed in facilities which have temporarily been adapted to perform this function. New places for refugees are being sought as, according to the Bulgarian Ministry of Internal Affairs forecasts, the number of refugees will rise up to 11,000 people by the end of this year.
- The rising number of refugees from Syria is becoming a serious challenge for the EU. The bulk of the burden of taking in two million refugees from Syria has been taken by the Middle East states (Lebanon 800,000 people, Jordan 650,000 people, Turkey 500,000 people) but according to the UN the number of refugees may increase to as much as five million by 2015, and mounting migration pressure on Bulgaria seems inevitable. Sofia will therefore advocate for the principle of solidarity in the EU migration policy. Furthermore, the issue of immigrants will be an additional burden for Bulgaria in its efforts to join the Schengen zone. Bulgaria, together with Romania, fulfilled all the requirements to enter the Schengen zone as early as 2011, but some EU countries do not agree with Bulgaria and Romania's accession, citing their insufficient progress in fighting corruption. Bulgaria's difficulties in taking in refugees may become another pretext to justify denying

it membership of the Schengen zone.

- The main political forces, with the exception of the xenophobic opposition party Ataka, have refrained from placing responsibility for the influx of refugees on Turkey. However, in the long term the question of refugees may present a challenge to the maintenance of good relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. Opinion polls indicate that there are deep concerns about increased immigrations. Although Bulgarian humanitarian, social and religious organisations have arranged for large-scale help for refugees, anti-immigration feelings have been intensified by Ataka (which gained 7% support in the last elections). The issue of refugees is another factor destabilising the Bulgarian political scene as the government of Plamen Oresharski, which is composed of Socialists and parties representing the Turkish minority, depends on informal backing from Ataka in parliament; the ruling coalition lacks one vote in order to have a majority.