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Macedonia and the migrant crisis

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On 20th August Macedonia declared a state of emergency in the border regions in the north and south of the country and closed its border with Greece due to an unprecedented influx of migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa. They were crossing Macedonia and Serbia en route to Hungary and then mainly to Austria and Germany. However, although the army was deployed at the border, it was unable to calm the situation; on the contrary, it led to unrest and a dozen refugees were injured. In the face of growing chaos and with the Macedonian government under fire from human rights organisations, the Macedonian police let the crowding migrants in. When the mounting scale of the influx of refugees to Europe, their determination and the weakness of the Macedonian state are all taken into account, a further escalation of the crisis should be expected, not only in Macedonia but also in Serbia.

A route through Macedonia

In July this year a record number of migrants attempting to cross EU borders illegally was reported (107,000). Furthermore, the Balkan migration route, which is an extension of the East Mediterranean route, has become the most dynamically developing route taken to cross EU borders illegally in 2015. In June 2015 20,000 migrants were registered when entering the EU from the central Mediterranean route leading to Italy (the most popular route in 2013-2014), while in the same time period over 50,000 were stopped at the Aegean Sea. Following changes that have occurred in the Balkan migration route, Greece and Macedonia are at present taking in the largest number of migrants. This is linked with controls which have been stepped up by Bulgaria and the construction of a wall at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Macedonia's problems are also caused by the Greek policy of ceasing to control the influx of migrants and asylum seekers and even makes it easier for them to quickly leave Greece, which has increased the pressure at the Macedonian-Greek border. The development of criminal groups involved in smuggling of people across borders should also be factored in. Hungary is the gateway to the Schengen zone for migrants passing through Macedonia and has announced that by the end of August the construction of the wall along its border with Serbia will be completed. Hungary has also introduced considerable amendments to its asylum law which in fact mean that all refugees will be automatically sent back to Serbia and Macedonia (which are recognised as safe third states). This has caused an increase in the number of people interested in getting to the EU as quickly as possible by this very route. It has also sparked concern in the governments in Belgrade and in Skopje that they will have to cope with the problem of a growing flow of refugees unaided.

It is even more likely since the possibility of sending refugees back to Greece is very difficult because this country has not signed the implementation protocol attached to the readmission agreement with Macedonia.

Between a rock and a hard place

In the present situation Macedonia is being under a lot of pressure from the EU member states which demand that border controls be stepped up and the flow of people limited. However, the Macedonian administration is not able to competently control the influx of people illegally crossing the border, let alone help migrants and asylum seekers who need to have medical assistance provided, nor can it provide appropriate living conditions. Until June this year the Macedonian government tried to limit the flow of migrants by way of restrictive regulations which were meant to discourage foreigners from crossing the country. Refugees were forbidden to use public transport, they were often placed in closed centres and considered witnesses to the practice of human smuggling. On the other hand, the Macedonian-Greek border was not appropriately protected and the Greek government was in conflict with the government in Skopje and not interested in developing bilateral co-operation in this area. The strategy undertaken by the Macedonian government has proved ineffective. Along with an increase in the number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers, over a dozen incidents were reported with fatalities in double figures.

All that has led to amendments to asylum law. Since mid-June this year asylum seekers in Macedonia have been able to apply for temporary protection which allows them to stay in the country for 72 hours. They are no longer detained following the illegal crossing of the border and they can now use public transportation. On the one hand, new amendments have led to a better control of the flow of migrants. On the other hand, they have substantially facilitated the crossing of Macedonia's territory, which has increased the attractiveness of the Balkan migration route. The Macedonian government estimates that in the last two months 42,000 migrants have crossed its territory. It has therefore modified its strategy and has eventually decided to announce a state of emergency in the regions close the Macedonian-Greek border which was supposed to be controlled by the army. However, these measures have been put in place too late and the attempt to tighten the border control has led to unrest among migrants and the government was forced to allow them to enter the country.

The assessment and outlook

Given the increased influx of migrants and asylum seekers to Greece, a further escalation of problems can be expected in Macedonia and also to other countries on the Balkan route. Macedonia has responded to the migrant crisis too late and in an inconsistent manner (ranging from a liberal policy enabling foreigners to cross the border and document each migrant to a temporary closing of the border). The scale of the influx considerably exceeds Macedonia's capacity for receiving migrants (the sole reception centre can accommodate a maximum of 150 people) and the lack of reaction from Greece is compounding the situation. Skopje is not able to assure even minimum standards of protection for asylum seekers or vulnerable groups, such as families with children, or a selection of migrants as

not all people trying to get to Europe are refugees. The lack of controls provides fertile ground for further development of organised crime.

The Macedonian government's requests for the EU to help have not yet yielded any major results. At the end of July this year the EU offered merely €90,000 for helping refugees. The European Commission has announced that it is launching an aid programme for the Western Balkans and Turkey but it will amount only to €8 million, which will not lead to a considerable improvement in the situation. The Macedonian government claims that the current crisis above all results from the policy of Greece which has shifted the problem onto neighbouring countries while receiving substantial funding for immigration policy and support from Frontex.

Moving beyond the financial issues, Macedonia by itself will not be able to face the challenge. This is due both to favourable geographical factors (a short sea route between Turkey and Greece, migrants transferred by Greek government from the islands to the mainland, the porousness of the Greek-Macedonian border) and political aspects, including Greece's inept immigration policy, Hungary's anti-immigration moods and the EU as a whole not applying the principles of the common asylum policy.

Map

The Balkan route taken by migrants


SLOVAKIA
AUSTRIA
UKRAINE
HUNGARY
MOLDOVA
SLOVENIA
CROATIA
ROMANIA
BOSNIA
AND
HERZEGOVINA
ITALY
SERBIA
MONTENEGRO
KOSOVO
BULGARIA
MACEDONIA
ALBANIA
GREECE
TURKEY