

## Transit states helpless in the face of mass migration

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The closing of the Hungarian border with Serbia on 15 September resulted in the diversion of the flow of migrants, who have mainly been heading via the Balkans to Germany. The migrants started to head en masse for Croatia, from where they are proceeding to Austria, mainly via Hungary. The closure of the Serbian-Hungarian border has not significantly reduced the number of people trying to get into Europe via the Western Balkans. According to the Macedonian police, at least two thousand migrants a day are still arriving in the country from Greece. None of the countries in the region has been able to halt the wave of migration, and so they have been trying to quickly transfer the groups of migrants through to neighbouring countries, a move which, combined with attempts to block the flow of migrants, has raised numerous tensions in the region and led to mutual recriminations about the escalation of the crisis. In connection with the continuing wave of migrants, further congestion at the borders can be expected, which could easily degenerate into clashes with the police and lead to a humanitarian disaster in the overcrowded camps.

### New migration routes

After the closing of Hungary's border with Serbia on 15 September, and the riots at the Horgoš/Röske border crossing, the migrants have been entering the EU from Serbia, mainly across the Serbian-Croatian border. Croatia has started to receive both the groups that tried to push through the Serbian-Hungarian border and the new immigrants who entered Serbia from Macedonia. The Croatian authorities initially stated that they were prepared to accept the migrants and provide them with transit via Slovenia to Austria, but after two days the country's administrative and logistical capabilities were exhausted (on 17 September alone about eight thousand migrants arrived in Croatia). When Slovenia rejected the Croatian authorities' proposal to create a 'corridor' for migrants to Austria, Croatia began transporting the migrants to the border with Hungary. Under pressure from the migrants, Hungary has taken a two-pronged action: on the one hand, it has abandoned its restrictive procedures for registering the migrants, and has been transporting them to the Austrian border, thus relieving congestion on its southern border and creating a *de facto* safe corridor (on 19-21 September 25,000 people reached Austria by this route); on the other hand, it has begun to seal off its border with Croatia, accusing it of displacing its problems onto the shoulders of its neighbours. Croatia has also closed seven of its eight border crossings with Serbia (even though the majority of migrants have been entering Croatia bypassing the border checkpoints'), paralysing the transport routes which are of critical importance for regional trade. This move has led to considerable tension in relations between the two countries, but

currently, all the border crossings between the two countries are closed.

### **Serbia: moves to start EU accession negotiations**

Serbia has been emphasising that it finds itself on the migration route between EU countries (the migrants reach Serbia from Greece via Macedonia), and it is now calling for financial support from EU. Because it is a priority for the Serbian authorities to quickly open negotiations on accession to the EU, Belgrade has agreed on its response to the influx of migrants with key partners in the EU, especially Germany, and is primarily focused on facilitating the migrants' transit across its territory. The Serbian government has highlighted its humane approach to the immigrants and set itself in opposition to the anti-immigrant attitude displayed by the Hungarian authorities. This line has been supported by a mostly benevolent attitude from Serbian society towards the refugees (resulting also from the experience of Serbian refugees in the 1990s). However, accepting more migrants for a longer period of time will exceed the country's capabilities. Serbia only has about 200 places in refugee camps, and the two temporary aid stations at the borders with Macedonia and Hungary are unprepared for the worsening weather conditions. Meanwhile the incidental expenses of the migration crisis are rising; the losses resulting from Hungary and Croatia blocking the borders have already exceeded €7 million.

### **Croatia: the collision with reality**

The Croatian government initially declared that it was willing to ensure transit for the migrants, putting itself in opposition to Hungary's approach, as Serbia has done. The ruling leftist coalition assumed that, in cooperation with Austria and Germany, it would be able to cope with the wave of migration resulting from the closure of the Hungarian-Serbian border. which would have boosted its popularity ratings until after the parliamentary elections in November. As in Serbia, the public are mostly positively inclined to help the refugees, because of the memory of the wars of the 1990s. However, the rate of the migrants' influx exceeded Croatia's logistical capacity (the government had prepared around 3000 places in reception camps); and the country's president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović (whose roots lie in the right-wing opposition) has called for a tougher policy line, and has criticised Germany's position. The Croatian authorities are trying to just briefly register the migrants and slow down their movement to other EU states, holding them for a few days in the camps. Due to the increasing number of migrants (45,000 in the last week), the country's logistical capabilities are being exhausted, and further steps to seal the border with Serbia can be expected.

### **Slovenia: staying on the sidelines**

Slovenia has so far escaped the influx of large scale migrant groups, as the Croats have mainly been transporting the migrants to the Hungarian border. Nevertheless the Slovenian police are preparing for stronger migration pressure: it has strengthened its border controls, suspended train connections with Croatia and is putting up barbed wire along the border near the main Zagreb-Ljubljana road. The Slovenian police have already demonstrated their

firmness by using tear gas to restore order at the border crossings. The government in Ljubljana has declared that it does not intend to deviate from the procedures for registering the migrants. These migrants who cross the border are placed in centres and registered. However, leaving fingerprints during registration is voluntary. Afterwards they are allowed to head on to Austria by their own means.

### **Regional implications: shifting the responsibility**

None of the countries in the region are considered as attractive destination countries by the migrants, and so they wish to perform their role as transit countries; in this regard they are pursuing a policy of reacting to the moves taken by Austria and Germany. All the countries in the region are trying to limit the number of incoming migrants in order to maintain control over the transit process, but these active ties are becoming increasingly ineffective. The countries are accusing each other of worsening the problems associated with the current crisis. The large-scale migration flows are placing an increasing burden on these countries' administrations, and they entail increasing economic costs associated with the paralysis at the borders. All the transit countries are demanding decisive action from the EU, with particular emphasis on sealing the Turkish-Greek border and organising hotspots in Greece.

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