

Anti-migration cooperation between Vienna, Budapest and Belgrade

Marta Szpala

During a meeting in Belgrade on 16 November, Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić, Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán and Austria's chancellor Karl Nehammer signed a memorandum on cooperation to counter illegal migration flows. According to a declaration by the politicians, Austria and Hungary will share the cost of readmission of people from Serbia who do not have the right to obtain international protection. They also agreed to step up the security of the Serbian-Macedonian border. Serbia also will increase border police presence along the border with North Macedonia and will send an additional 100 police officers, who will be supported by 100 police officers from Austria and will be reinforced with drones, vehicles, and thermal cameras. Hungary has also pledged assistance in this regard but has not made any specific guarantees. According to the Austrian chancellor, the ineffectiveness of the EU's migration policy has forced those member states who want to combat irregular migration to deepen their cooperation. Nehammer also expressed the hope that this would force the EU institutions to be more active in this field.

According to data from UNHCR, 84,000 irregular migrants came to Serbia between January and September 2022, an increase of 94% compared to the same period last year. They were mainly citizens of Afghanistan (40%), Syria (20%), Burundi (9%), and Pakistan (6%). During the same period, 94,000 people applied for asylum in Austria. Of particular concern to Vienna are the migrants from India (7000 applications) and Burundi, who enter Serbia under bilateral visa waiver agreements and then try to enter the EU.

Commentary

- The aim of this Vienna-Budapest-Belgrade format is to demonstrate the effectiveness of these governments in combating illegal migration, in contrast to the ineffective actions of the European institutions. The first meeting in this format took place on 3 October in Budapest; the next is due to take place in Vienna. The policies of Austria and Hungary are in line with the current approach of the EU, which – due to its inability to develop new principles concerning this policy – is decelerating the rate of migration by strengthening controls at individual borders, and tolerating so-called chain pushbacks. The EU's failure to act has led to the burden of border control being shifted in non-EU transit countries, which also have to provide places for the migrants in temporary camps, even though EU-member border countries such as Greece and Bulgaria have the support of the EU and enjoy much more substantial resources for migration policy.

- Although the three states have declared they will cooperate on migration issues, they actually have completely divergent goals in this area. Austria is a major migrant destination and would like to reduce their numbers on the Balkan route. Hungary, on the other hand, is only a transit country and is trying to pass the problem of managing migration onto its neighbours (by pushing the newcomers back to Serbia, or onward into countries bordering the EU), while creating its own image as a state which is defending the external borders of the EU. This year Hungary claimed to have recorded 250,000 attempts to cross its border illegally (although according to Frontex, there were only 106,000 on the entire Balkan route), but this was overshadowed by the challenge of receiving refugees from Ukraine (out of 1.7 million Ukrainians who crossed the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, only around 32,000 applied for various forms of assistance in Hungary). Serbia, on the other hand, is trying to strengthen its relations with its close partners such as Austria and Hungary, while at the same time fearing that it will become a place for the creation of migrant camps.
- One tangible effect of the Belgrade summit was Serbia's withdrawal from the visa-free travel agreements with Tunisia and Burundi (which Germany had also pressed for). Belgrade has announced the termination of other agreements of this type in the immediate future. This will relieve the burden on countries such as Austria and Germany, and reduce the number of applications from people who had little chance of asylum.
- The announcement that Austria and Hungary will share in the costs of readmission is probably intended to reassure public opinion in Serbia, and to ensure that the country's territory does not become a place for large migrant camps. However, this move may be counterproductive. Most of the migrants in Serbia come from countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan or Syria, to which they cannot be sent back. Austria and Hungary, on the other hand, may use this element of the agreement to transfer migrants to Serbia to await their return to their countries of origin (although in most cases this cannot be done). At the same time, it is the EU countries that have been much more effective in organising readmission and forced returns (also with the support of Frontex) where this is allowed.
- Strengthening controls on the Serbian-Macedonian border is supposed to bring tangible benefits for Serbia. However, this is unlikely to translate into a significant fall in the number of migrants heading to the EU, but will only lead to a modification of the routes they take along the Balkan route, and a greater accumulation of migrants in the countries neighbouring Serbia (i.e. North Macedonia). Currently, 51% of migrants arrive in Serbia via North Macedonia and 32% via Bulgaria. There is likely to be an increase in people arriving via the latter route, which is more difficult to control as it passes through mountainous, depopulated areas. Migrants will also continue to try to enter the EU via Albania and Montenegro, and then Croatia.