



Austrian National Defence Academy
Vienna

THE INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE CRISIS AS A CHALLENGE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Predrag Jureković

Since summer 2015, the so-called Balkan route has been in the focus of migrating refugees on their way into the European Union. After initial problems and increasing bilateral conflicts, the countries of the Western Balkans have come to accept their role as a transit zone. This fragile strategy, however, should be replaced by an overall European refugee concept.

Confrontation with an international crisis

The influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees or migrants, especially from the Middle East, who have, since 2015, increasingly used the Balkan route as a less dangerous escape route, poses comprehensive socio-cultural, political, economic, and security challenges to the states in the region. For the first time since the end of the Yugoslav wars of disintegration, countries in the Western Balkans have not only become targets of international support initiatives as part of regional peace consolidation, but have themselves become affected by the consequences of an international humanitarian crisis, and consequently have to contribute to its resolution in solidarity with the European Union.

In so doing, they can fall back on what they learned from their own, relatively recent experiences in dealing with large numbers of

refugees during the Yugoslav wars of disintegration. Although religion was used as a pretext in the Balkan Wars, the approach of non-Muslims towards Islam as a religious and cultural factor is, overall, much more relaxed in the Western Balkans than it usually is in Central and Western Europe. From the point of view of the Western Balkan states, the problem in the current refugee situation is their own difficult economic and social situation (with unemployment rates of 16 to 30 percent), the lack of a tradition of integrating people of non-European extraction, and the poor solidarity shown so far on the part of the European Union in collectively dealing with the crisis.

Balkan Route 1 (Macedonia - Serbia - Hungary)

As of June 2015, there has been a clear trend that refugees or migrants from the Middle Eastern conflict areas (particularly Iraq and Syria), as well as from Afghanistan and other

Central-Asian Countries increasingly tried to come to Central and Western Europe via Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary. Macedonia and Serbia, which until then had been confronted only with small groups of refugees, suddenly faced, and had to handle, an onrush of 2,000 to 4,000 refugees per day, whose intention was to cross through these countries and pass through Hungary as fast as possible in order to reach Austria and Germany. Towns and municipalities, which up to then had been unknown to the world at large, such as Gevgelija, located on the Macedonian border to Greece, or the southern Serbian towns of Bujanovac and Preševo, inhabited principally by ethnic Albanians and located close to the Macedonian border, caught the attention of the international media because of the dimension of the humanitarian problem.

Changes in the Balkan route as of September

The course of the Balkan route changed for the first time in mid-September due to the toughening of the Hungarian asylum policy. Because of the completion of the fence along the border to Serbia, and the closure of the Hungarian-Serbian border crossing at Röszke to refugees and migrants, Serbia saw itself forced to redirect the refugee stream to the Serbian-Croatian border at Šid-Tovarnik. From one day to the next, the young EU member Croatia, which, like Serbia and Macedonia, practically had not had any experience in dealing with extra-regional refugees, found itself in the role of regional hot-spot in the international refugee crisis.

From September to November, the number of refugees passing daily through Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia as transit countries rose to over 5,000. As per the statistics of the Croatian Ministry of the Interior, by 9 November, 342,000 refugees or migrants had used Croatia as a transit country. Until mid-October, the Croatian authorities transported them to the border crossings to

Hungary. After the Hungarian border fence was also completed along the Croatian border, Slovenia replaced Hungary as the end point of the Balkan route in mid-October. With the beginning of winter, the number of refugees arriving daily on this route dropped to approx. 500 - 3,000. In mid-January, an end to the refugee crisis was not foreseeable. By the end of last year, Croatia registered 562,000 persons and Serbia another 549,000, who passed through on the refugee route.

Overwhelmed at the beginning of the refugee crisis

So far, the crisis management balance sheet may be summarised as follows: In the beginning, all Western Balkan countries affected by the international refugee crisis appeared overwhelmed by the huge humanitarian challenges. Crisis management, however, clearly improved by October/November.

Initially, there was a lack of appropriate reception facilities for refugees or migrants. In this first phase, the supply with foodstuff was inadequate, and the transport of refugees or migrants by rail, bus, or other means proved chaotic and was uncoordinated between the countries of the Western Balkans. Primary care for refugees or migrants was assumed by human rights organisations and private initiatives – as was also often the case in Austria, Germany and Hungary. Evidence of authorities being overwhelmed, for example, in Macedonia, were the repeated use of tear gas against refugees in Gevgelija by the Macedonian police and the forced accommodation, also of pregnant migrants, in the mass shelters of Gazi Baba, close to the capital Skopje. The latter was heavily criticised by Amnesty International.

As Croatia and Serbia were overwhelmed by the refugee crisis, their relations deteriorated dramatically at the end of September. Croatia, whose government accused Serbia of acting in „secret unison with Hungary“ in

passing on numerous refugees to the Croatian border, closed its borders for several days to Serbian heavy traffic and also introduced additional checks for Serbian car traffic. In Serbia, numerous media and some politicians reacted with nationalist slogans by comparing the excessive Croatian measures with anti-Serbian measures taken by the Fascist regime in Croatia during World War II.

Improvement of regional cooperation...

Since October and November, regional cooperation in crisis management has markedly improved. The EU Commission has contributed to this by organising meetings, in which the states and governments hit by the refugee crisis agreed on a common coordination mechanism, so as to prevent chaotic conditions and a further deterioration of bilateral relations. The flow of information on newly arriving refugees among the affected countries along the Balkan route has worked without major problems since November, at the latest. A permanent train connection was installed between the Serbian-Croatian border and the largest regional reception centre for refugees in Slavonski Brod, Croatia, where up to 5,000 refugees can be sheltered over a longer period. Serbian and Croatian police officers cooperate closely in transporting refugees. Moreover, at the border to Greece, Croatian and Serbian colleagues support Macedonian border police officers in registering arriving refugees.

... however, in a restricted manner

At times, some regional coordination measures in the refugee crisis face external criticism. This applies, in particular, to Croatia's, Serbia's and Macedonia's policy, adopted in mid-November, of only letting Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees continue onward, on the grounds that only these groups have a prospect of receiving asylum in their target countries in Western and Northern Europe. According to the UNHCR, the practice of rejecting potential asylum seekers due to

their ethnicity and/or race violates human rights. As a matter of course, Greece appears displeased to have to take back refugees who were rejected by Macedonia. Also bilateral conflicts have not entirely disappeared. The razor-wire border fence, „temporarily“ erected by the Slovenian Armed Forces at 36 sites along the border to Croatia, with a length of approx. 140 km, is heavily criticised, not only by the Croatian government, but also by the local population on both sides of the border. The Slovenian government calls the border fence a preventive measure to avert illegal border crossings.

Fragility of the „transit strategy“

Crisis management in the refugee crisis between the affected countries along the Balkan route has improved, especially because of the consensus among them that the refugees or migrants are to be passed on, as fast as possible, „with combined effort“ to Austria and Germany. As, up to now, only few persons have sought asylum in Western Balkan countries, and as refugees or migrants generally remain in the Western Balkan countries only for a few days, acceptance of the local population is still relatively high. In contrast to Austria and Germany, there have been no intensive discussions pertaining to integration in the countries of the Western Balkans.

Dependence on target countries and EU policy

A substantial decrease in Austria's and Germany's capacities to accommodate refugees, the continuation of the policy of non-solidarity by many EU member countries concerning refugee quotas, and the lack of positive effects from the November 2015 agreement between the EU and Turkey might cast doubt on the transit strategy of the Western Balkan countries. The scenario of a refugee tailback along the Balkan route could overtax the Western Balkan countries in social and economic terms. Bilateral pro-

blems among the affected countries would increase again. In this scenario, countries not yet part of the Balkan route, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro might be increasingly used by refugees or migrants as alternative routes.

Imprint:

Copyright, Production,

Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal
Ministry of Defence and Sports
Roßauer Lände 1
1090 Vienna

Edited by:

National Defence Academy
Vienna
Institute for Peace Support and
Conflict Management
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna
+43 (0) 50201 10 28701
lvak.ifk@bmlvs.gv.at

Copyright:

© Republic of Austria /
Federal Ministry of Defence
and Sports / All rights reserved

Periodikum der

Landesverteidigungsakademie

February 2016

Economic and social aspects

As long as the Western Balkans primarily remain a transit zone for refugees or migrants, the economic strain on these countries will remain manageable and can be alleviated by financial support of the EU. By the end of 2015, the EU Commission had supported Serbia and Macedonia with approx. € 21 mio to manage the crisis, which made up for at least some of the costs. In October, Croatia, being an EU member, received € 5 mio in immediate support. In November, Croatia was promised a further € 16.4 mio, to augment the police force operating on the border to Serbia. Should larger numbers of refugees have to be supported in the Western Balkans over a longer period of time, the financial strain would massively increase, and the governments would face considerable financial problems.

As a consequence of the stream of refugees from the Middle East, asylum seekers from the Western Balkans, especially from Kosovo, are being sent back to their home countries. The repatriation of tens of thousands of „Balkan refugees“, whose countries are now considered safe third countries, poses a huge challenge to the weak economy of Kosovo, in particular, with its unemployment rate of over 30 percent - despite the economic incentives provided by the German government.

Security aspects

Since the beginning of the crisis, the governments of Croatia and Serbia have attempted to emphasise the humanitarian aspect and not the security-political one. Therefore, crisis management is primarily conducted

by police forces. Neither has a border fence been set up, nor have the armed forces been deployed to the border (as of mid-January). In contrast to this, in August 2015 the Macedonian government briefly declared a state of emergency and, by doing so, employed army units in addition to police forces.

The fact that at least one of the terrorists of 13 November in Paris had entered the EU along the Balkan route shows that the phenomenon of Islamist sleepers should not be underestimated in the context of migration. Terrorism experts in Western Balkan countries, however, also warn against the hysteria of perceiving almost every male refugee as a potential terrorist. Human rights organisations active in the region warn that the refugees themselves might increasingly become victims of violence, e.g. by right-wing extremist or criminal groups, should they be „stuck“ on the Balkan route for a longer period.

Recommendations

- Inclusion of the Western Balkan countries in an overall European concept targeted at dealing with the refugee crisis;
- Financial support to increase capacities in the region to absorb refugees;
- Improvement of the intra-regional coordination mechanism concerning the refugee issue, so as to prevent an increase in bilateral conflicts along the Balkan route.

Personal Data:

Dr. phil. Predrag Jureković (*1969); researcher and head of division at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management since 2003; teaching and research field: conflict transformation and stabilisation process in the Balkan region; EU policy towards South East Europe; conflict prevention; application of scenario techniques in conflict research. predrag.jurekovic@bmlvs.gv.at

Note: This contribution exclusively represents the author's own opinion.

IFK Monitor
International
February 2016