

The Impact of the Migration Crisis on Political Dynamics in the Western Balkans

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In the course of 2015 and the first quarter of 2016, an estimated 920,000 migrants and refugees – primarily from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq – passed through the Western Balkans region on their way to EU Member States further north.¹ The “Western Balkan route” became a well-known term for public debates throughout the EU. With the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, under which the EU and Turkey agreed to curb irregular migration across the Aegean Sea, the number of migrants passing through the Western Balkans has been significantly reduced. According to Frontex data, irregular border detections decreased from around 60,000 in January to less than 2,000 detections in September 2016.²

This article will deal with the changing nature of migratory processes along the Western Balkan route, as well as the political responses to it. Migration management along the Western Balkan route has become a less salient topic in the EU, although this may change again at any moment. The recent crisis highlights the vulnerabilities deriving from a lack of political coordination and unilateral action in a region still struggling with ethnic nationalism and unstable bilateral relations.

The Migration Crisis and the Western Balkans

The “Western Balkan route” has been of relevance for two categories of migrants: on the one hand, migrants from the Western Balkan countries seeking to move to the EU. The fact that many citizens of Western Balkan countries are migrating into the EU (or elsewhere) for a better life has become a demographic problem. Around one-third of those born in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania now live abroad. Young people are often frustrated with the lack of opportunities and economic hardship. Yet, this kind of regional migration has not been the focus of the migration crisis, which was directed rather towards the migrants who came from Turkey to Greece by land or sea, and crossed the Western Balkans with the aim of entering the Schengen Area. The most frequented route was through Macedonia, Serbia to Hungary and then further on to mainly Austria, Germany and Sweden. A less frequently used route led from Serbia to Bulgaria and other EU Member States. In early 2016, Western Balkan countries gradually ended the “wave-through” approach. Only persons of Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi origin were allowed to pass further north. After the entry into force of the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, the transit along the Western Balkan route was also no longer permitted.

The Balkan route has not been entirely sealed off. There are an estimated 62,000 migrants currently living or stranded in Greece. Many of them are still keen to move on to other EU Member States. Migrants,

¹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *ECHO Factsheet. Serbia: Response to the Refugee Crisis*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/serbia_en.pdf (last accessed on 26 April 2017), 2017.

² FRONTEX. *Risk Analysis 2017*. Online version: TT-AC-17-001-EN-N. doi:10.2819/250349. Available at: http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2017.pdf (last accessed on 26 April 2017): 19, 2017.

TABLE 1

The Western Balkan Route According to Frontex Data

	Western Balkan route in 2015		Western Balkan route in 2016	
Detections of illegal border-crossing		764,038		130,261
	Not specified	556,258	Not specified	102,430
Top-ranking nationalities	Syria	90,065	Afghanistan	10,620
	Afghanistan	53,237	Pakistan	5,583
	Other	64,478	Other	11,628

Sources: FRONTEX *Risk Analysis* 2016 and 2017.

therefore, are still seeking to cross the Balkans undetected although this now happens in lower numbers and by using more diversified routes. Human smuggling is a booming business, with security agencies estimating that the smuggling business is worth around €2 billion a year.³ The official “closure” of the Western Balkan route has also left a number of migrants trapped, especially in Serbia and Macedonia. According to EU and UNHCR estimates, there are around 8,000 migrants stranded in Serbia (as of early 2017).⁴ A particular challenge has been that around 10 percent of these migrants have been unaccompanied minors. The actual numbers may be higher as many migrants hide and refrain from starting asylum procedures in the Western Balkan states. They often shelter in abandoned warehouses, for instance, in the area of Belgrade’s main train station.

The Migration Crisis and Regional Politics

Migration has become a salient issue around the world. The Western Balkans is no exception, only here this significant and, by default, transnational issue interrelates with weak and contested state relations. The Western Balkans governments and political elites still have weak communication and coordination channels with one another, and there are unresolved constitutional issues, such as Serbia’s contestation of Kosovo’s independence, and conflictual bilateral relations. Since 2005, Macedonia’s EU and NATO membership process has been blocked by Greece because of a dispute over the country’s name. The migration crisis provided the region’s politicians with an opportunity to galvanize ethnic tensions and play a nationalistic card.

However, the closure of the Western Balkan route was not initiated from within the region. In early 2016, Austria and the Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) started to actively work towards a closure of the route. This was done in close cooperation with Western Balkan governments but against the priorities of the Greek government. Hungary was particularly outspoken and started early on to fortify its borders with Serbia. It also conducted an explicit anti-immigration and anti-Islam campaign. Hungary’s restrictive approach had spillover effects on the political dynamics in the Western Balkan states. The fence along the Serbian-Hungarian border diverted the Western Balkan route to Croatia. The Croatian government reacted by accusing Serbia and Hungary of orchestrating the re-direction of the migrant flow. In consequence, Croatia closed its borders with Serbia to trucks. Serbia reacted with countermeasures at the Croatian border (such as a temporary ban on imports of Croatian goods). In addition, Serbia – and further south, Macedonia – sought to stop migrants even before they entered their territory. New fences were put up at the borders and additional police and army troops were also deployed. In spring 2016, migrants stranded at the Greek border outpost of Idomeni clashed with Macedonian border police forces while demanding a re-opening of the Balkan route. In effect, Greece as an EU Member State was cut off from the rest of the EU by the Western Balkans and northern EU Member States keen to keep migrants out of their territory. However, the EU sought to assist Greece by relocating migrants directly from Greece (and, for that matter, Turkey) into other EU Member States in accordance with a predefined quota system. The implementation of this plan has proceeded, albeit at a slow pace.

³ SIEBENHAAR, Hans-Peter and HOPPE, Till (eds.). “Smugglers take over the Balkan route.” Available at: *Handelsblatt Global* <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/smugglers-take-over-the-balkan-route-715031> (last accessed on 26 April 2017), 2017.

⁴ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *ECHO Factsheet. Serbia: Response to the Refugee Crisis*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/serbia_en.pdf (last accessed on 26 April 2017), 2017 and LE BLOND, Josie (ed.). “Refugees brave Serbia’s cold in hope of better future.” Report for UNHCR. Available at: www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/2/588f254d4.html (last accessed on 26 April 2017), 2017.

The EU, in particular the European Commission, has always been keen to avoid or end unilateral responses in the context of the migration crisis. It endeavoured to conceive of a coherent response. In 2016, special “Western Balkans Summits” were conducted in Paris and Vienna gathering the prime ministers of the southeastern countries and their EU counterparts and senior officials of the Commission. The July 2016 Paris Summit delivered a “roadmap” on how to strengthen regional cooperation and coherence. The EU reiterated its commitment to the Western Balkans eventual accession to the EU. The EU has also supported Serbia and the other Western Balkan countries financially and operationally. It helped to improve reception capacities, drafting new asylum laws and developing border surveillance systems and closer cooperation with Frontex and Europol.

Migrants, therefore, are still seeking to cross the Balkans undetected although this now happens in lower numbers and by using more diversified routes. Human smuggling is a booming business

A consequence of the migration crisis has not only been that the EU has again become more aware of and interested in the region. It also provided individual politicians and governments with an opportunity to present themselves as anchors of stability and reliable international partners. This could be particularly observed in the case of the Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who was under considerable domestic pressure due to revelations of wiretapping, mass surveillance and high-level corruption. Due to these allegations, his government was forced to step down in early 2016 and to accept a new election. The European Commission was very critical of Macedonia’s development in terms of compliance with rule of law and spoke

openly of “concerns” about the government’s “state capture” in its 2016 country report.⁵ Yet the migration crisis provided Mr Gruevski with a welcome opportunity to gain support from individual EU Member States. Sebastian Kurz, Austria’s Foreign Minister, attended an election rally in support of Mr Gruevski’s ruling party and emphasized his support and role during the migration crisis. While Mr Kurz defended his attendance claiming he was there only in his “capacity as a member of the European People’s Party,” he highlighted that Macedonia has become a “key partner in managing the migration crisis” due to its efforts in closing the Western Balkan route.⁶ The open support of an EU Member State for a Balkan government under investigation for severe misconduct and failing to respect democratic standards received harsh criticism by domestic observers and fellow EU politicians.

Conclusions

This article has analyzed the impact of the migration crisis on the Western Balkans, focusing on the events of 2016 and early 2017, a period marked by the “closure” of the Western Balkan route. While this step reduced the number of migrants crossing through southeastern Europe on their way further north, it has left many migrants stranded in Greece and some Western Balkan countries and/or reverting to smuggling networks. Politically, the migration crisis has temporarily heightened bilateral tensions. It has also provided regional politicians, such as the Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, with an opportunity to present themselves as strongmen and to divert attention from domestic allegations of wrongdoings and corruption. Overall, the “crisis” *modus operandi* in relation to migration issues has come to an end in this region of southeastern Europe. The question still remains, however, as to whether the region’s politicians and elites have learned their lessons and are better prepared for future crises that require a transnational and coordinated response.

⁵ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report*. 2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. SWD (2016) 362 final.

⁶ FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR EUROPE, INTEGRATION AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS (BMEIA). “Federal Minister Kurz: ‘Macedonia remains key partner in managing the migration crisis.’” Press release. Available at: www.bmeia.gv.at/en/the-ministry/press/announcements/2016/11/federal-minister-kurz-macedonia-remains-key-partner-in-managing-the-migration-crisis/ (last accessed on 26 April 2017).