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The Last Barrier

Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia as the Last Barrier Between Hungary and Immigrants

ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

When migratory movements from the Middle East and North Africa towards Europe started in 2011, and in even greater numbers in 2015, few could envisage the scope and number of spheres that would be affected. Migrations labelled as critical, meaning that immediate solutions needed to be found, have brought clashes between Brussels and national states to the surface. These clashes over quotas of immigrants that each of the EU members had to accept have led to security issues related to the functionality of the Schengen Agreement. The countries of the Western Balkans, predominantly Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia, but also North Macedonia and most of all Turkey – although not members of the EU – still carry this burden exhausting their capacities. As for BiH, this new reality is causing political and security frictions in the country itself. Upon taking office, von der Leyen announced a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, but little has emerged on what this pact would entail. This leaves border countries and asylum seekers alike to grapple with a failed system.

The following paper aims at giving a cross-section of the MENA migratory status in the countries most affected by this phenomenon.

Special focus is given to Greece, as the first EU/Schengen entry point on this route toward the EU, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia, as these countries now serve as a sort of parking lot for thousands of immigrants stuck on their way. The paper tests the hypothesis that those two countries are the last barrier of unwanted immigration before their entry into Hungary and/or Croatia.

Journal of Economic Literature (JEL) codes: B15, D72, F51, F52, F53, H12

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INTRODUCTION

On September 22, 2015, the EU Council of Ministers passed Decision 2015/1601. This offered relief from the crisis to Italy and Greece by relocating asylum-seekers to other EU member states. According to the decision, Hungary needed to examine applications and receive 1,294 asylum-seekers. So far, Hungary has accommodated none. After its proclamation that it rejects to receive any, Hungary has been subjected to political consequences.

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On the other side, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Serbia, neither of which are members of the EU, have become a *parking lot* for all of the immigrants that managed to reach the outer EU borderline after crossing Turkey, Greece, and North Macedonia. The question is, how is it possible that thousands of people crossed so many borders illegally from their countries of origin to the borders of Hungary and Croatia, which are the outer borders of the EU?

A final and comprehensive EU strategy on immigration management is yet to be adopted and enforced. Until this happens, transit countries will continue to face challenges that they are facing now – to provide accommodation, food, and medical care to immigrants already on their territories, while being aware of the possibility that the numbers will grow. The social, health, security and economic system of the transit countries are below the capacities needed in such situations. While all those countries, especially Turkey and Greece, do receive substantial financial aid from the

EU and other international organizations to mitigate the consequences, the capacities provided are still below the levels required, as numbers of this crisis are unprecedented in every aspect and category possible.

The migration and refugee crisis on the Western Balkan Route began in the second half of 2015 and lasted until 8 March, 2016 when this Route was officially closed. The closure of an organized and controlled transit of migrants across the Western Balkans has opened up space for illegal migration and criminal networks' operations, with particular focus on smuggling and trafficking.

In a short period of time, between January and March 2021, approximately 21,550 refugees and migrants (over 17% of whom were children) arrived in Europe. While arrivals drastically decreased in Greece (by 90%), Montenegro (64%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (43%) compared to the same period in 2020, arrivals increased by approximately 170% in Italy, 84% in Bulgaria and 41% Serbia. (The newly arrived populations

Figure 1: The Western Balkans Route



Source: DW, *Migrant routes through the Balkans to Germany*¹

are mainly from Tunisia (19.3%), Algeria (12.7%), Morocco (7.1%), Bangladesh (7%), Afghanistan (6%), Cote d'Ivoire (5.9%) and Syria (5.6%). Other declared countries of origin include Algeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Pakistan and Somalia². With the arrival of spring and milder weather during the reporting period, a further increase of arrivals is expected.

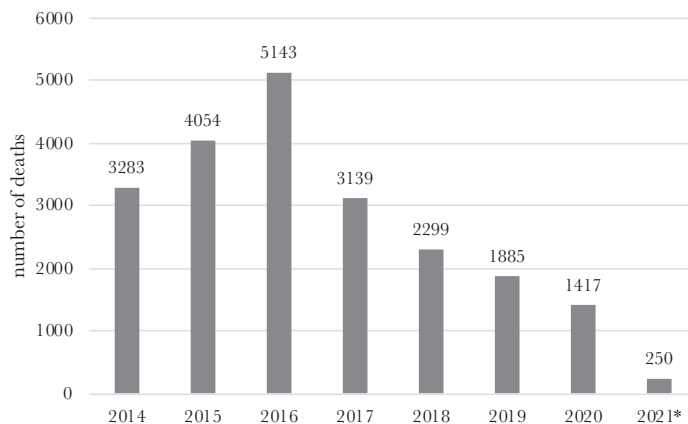
Turkey

In 2016, the EU and Turkey reached a deal to block irregular migration routes into Greece. However, in February 2020, Turkey announced that it would no longer enforce the deal. Since signing the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, migrants and refugees have attempted to use alternate paths to reach Europe, including sea crossings from Turkey to Greece. According to the agreement, migrants entering Greece would be immediately returned to Turkey, where Syrian nationals would receive temporary protection status. This so-called “swap arrangement” was also a part of the deal, meaning that for every Syrian considered inadmissible in terms of seeking and granting asylum in the EU and forced

back to Turkey, another Syrian from Turkey would be allowed to enter Europe and apply for asylum. Following the announcement from the Turkish Government in February 2020 that the Turkey-EU borders would be opened from the Turkish side, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) observed an increase in immigrant arrivals. One of the popular transit routes migrants use to leave Turkey and enter Greece is the Aegean Sea, as well as the land border between Turkey and Greece along the Maritsa River. Both routes, especially the maritime one, are dangerous (according to the IMO, more than 21,000 migrants have died trying to cross the Mediterranean since 2014).

Turkey remains home to the largest refugee population in the world with some four million refugees and asylum-seekers still on its territory. According to the latest available figures from the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), there are more than 4.5 million foreign nationals present in Turkish territory, 3.6 million of whom are seeking international protection. Most of those seeking international protection are Syrians (3,650,496 individuals) who are granted the temporary protection status in Turkey.

Figure 2: Migrants dead or missing in the Mediterranean Sea by year



Source: Statista 2021³

Greece

Greece is not only the first EU/Schengen entry point, but since geographically it is an archipelago, it also has the most vulnerable point in the Union (Tózsá - Sallai, 2018). Since the 1990s, migration has become a part of Greek public discourse, mainly through a rhetoric that focuses on the unauthorized entry of immigrants in the country.

The most significant developments in Greece were the arrival of refugee populations in 2015 and the change of government, from the coalition of right-wing New Democracy (ND) and the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) to the coalition of left-wing SYRIZA and the nationalist, conservative, right-wing Independent Greeks (Ilias et al., 2020:41).

Another key discourse of that time focused on the role of Greece in the management of European borders, especially due to its geographical position, which was a key argument regarding the uneven migration burdens that Greece had to manage. Greece called for “common (EU) responsibility” as well as “solidarity” in border management, arguing that immigration, especially illegal immigration, was not only a problem for the countries of the South.

A series of measures have since been taken, such as the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement and the ongoing NATO and Frontex operations under the scope of a more effective border control. As the recommendation of the European Commission highlights, even though Greece has taken a number of measures to deal with the situation, further efforts are needed. Specifically, the European Commission insisted on the need for a) more effective screenings in terms of the identification and registration procedures and b) systematic fingerprinting and transmission of data to the EURODAC databases to be compared with European databases.

Towards the end of 2012, a new electronic surveillance system was introduced along the Greek-Turkish land borders and the construction of a 12km fence was completed, making

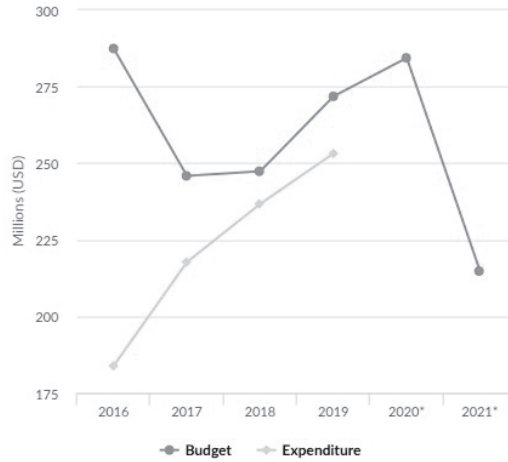
the entry from this part of the land borders along the Evros River practically impossible. These measures led to refugees and migrants attempting to enter Greece by sea and especially through the north-eastern sea borders, reaching a peak between the summer of 2015 and March 2016. Until today, the north-eastern sea borders still remain the main entry points (Aggelos et al., 2019).

Since in February 2020, Turkey announced that it would no longer enforce the 2016 accord between Ankara and the European Union, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis stated, ‘no illegal entries into Greece will be tolerated’. The Greek government took steps in response to the Turkish Government’s decision, including deploying forces to the border, suspending asylum applications and vowing to deport those who enter the country illegally.

In 2018, 36 000 new immigrants obtained a residence permit longer than 12 months in Greece (excluding EU citizens), 18.6% more than in 2017. In 2019, the number of first-time asylum applicants increased by 15.3%, to reach around 75 000. The majority of applicants came from Afghanistan (24,000), Syria (11,000) and Pakistan (6,400). The largest increase since 2018 concerned nationals of Afghanistan (+12,000) and the largest decrease concerned nationals of Iraq (-4,100). Of the 33,000 decisions taken in 2019, 53% were positive.⁴

The Greek government adopted all the regulations and directives issued by the EU in this sphere and adapted their own previous ones. Smuggling and the readmission of illegal immigrants proved to be the most challenging aspect in border management and entry control. Operation Aspida was launched in August 2012 and its main purpose was to strengthen border controls by enhancing the physical presence of patrols along the Greek–Turkish land borders. In contrast to the Evros fence, covering only 5% of the land borders between Greece and Turkey, Operation Aspida was deployed along 206 km of the Evros River (Ilias et al., 2020).

Figure 3: Budgets and Expenditure for Greece (Budget for 2021: US\$150,528,583)



Source: UNHCR, 2021 Planning Summary⁵

North Macedonia

When North Macedonia was facing the peak of the migrant crisis during 2015 and 2016, it erected a fence on parts of its border with Greece. Reports showed that more than a million people had crossed the border and ever since, the army has been deployed along it. Despite the efforts, North Macedonian authorities reported a drastic increase in the numbers of illegal entries and refugee smugglers.

According to the UNHCR, the total estimated number of arrivals in mixed movement up to the end of 2020 is 41,257; 211 asylum claims were submitted in 2020 and 2 persons were granted subsidiary protection.⁶

In 2020, the Minister of Internal Affairs declared that North Macedonia deployed partner police officers in joint patrols on the southern border. ‘Currently, 131 police officers from eight countries are deployed and we have the material and technical resources to close the border and prevent a new wave of migrants towards the territory of this country, and thus towards the territory of the European Union’⁷.

A state of crisis caused by immigration was

declared in North Macedonia in 2015. It expired in late March 2021 and was then reintroduced again on 2 April, 2021 by a decree issued by the President of North Macedonia and the Supreme Commander Stevo Pendarovski. The decree of 2 April re-engaged the army on the southern and northern borders of that country in order to prevent the illegal entry of migrants⁸.

Serbia

According to UNICEF⁹, despite the de-facto closure of the Balkan route in early March 2016, a constant stream of refugees and migrants continue to arrive in Serbia, mainly from North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – with strong support from cross-border smuggling and trafficking networks. Since 2015, more than 1.5 million refugees and migrants have passed through Serbia, of which between 25-33% were children. During 2020, the number of refugees and migrants present in Serbia at any given time was around 7,000, of which around 6,000 were accommodated in reception, transit

and asylum centres. Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) noted 3,180 newly registered persons in January 2021 (compared to 1,695 in February 2019) and 2,273 in February 2021 (compared to 2,633 in Feb 2020). Most new arrivals transit through North Macedonia. What is notable is the increase in the number of arrivals originating from Somalia in the first two months of 2021, with the top three nationalities of arrivals being Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia¹⁰. According to some NGOs in Serbia, the number of migrants gathering on the Serbian border hoping to make it on to Western Europe is increasing (Internet-2). For the vast majority of them, remaining stuck here is not an option at all.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

Since the beginning of 2018, close to 70,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina via the Western Balkans migration route. Restrictive COVID-19 measures slowed down the movement along the route. According to the UN, around 8,000 refugees and migrants are currently present in the country¹¹. A humanitarian crisis has become a reality with nearly 2,000 persons sleeping outside in freezing temperatures. The European Union provides emergency assistance and urges the authorities to act to save lives, identify suitable

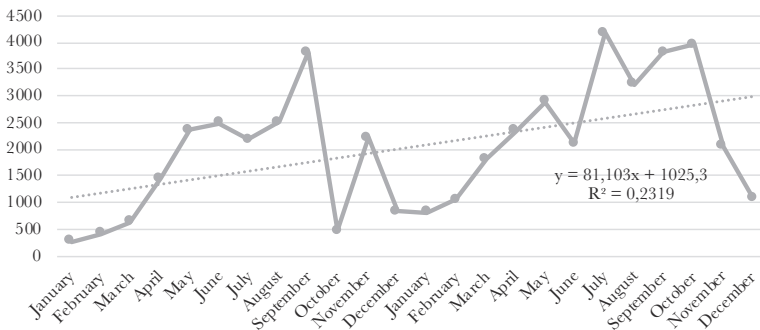
accommodation facilities and respect fundamental rights.

Since early 2018, the EU has provided €89 million directly to Bosnia and Herzegovina and through implementing partners. This funding helps address the immediate and mid-term needs of the refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. It is also meant to help the country strengthen its migration management capacities. This support includes €13.8 million in humanitarian aid to provide emergency assistance, implemented by international humanitarian organizations. This emergency response addresses the needs of refugees and migrants with a focus on the Una-Sana Canton, Tuzla and Sarajevo area¹².

The following chart comprises a summary of data for 2019-2020.

Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a uniform strategy for immigration management, either. The opposite attitudes of political actors at local, entity or state level are so much in dissonance that this obviously cannot lead to any harmonized institutional proceedings and decrees. An additional challenge for Bosnia and Herzegovina is its history of a recent (1992-1995) inter-ethnic, inter-religious and civil war in which Muslims fought Christians; and Middle East mujahideens¹⁴ who entered BiH during the war and committed severe atrocities against Christians. Around 330 of its citizens

Figure 4: Illegal migrants in BiH



Source: Migration Profile for BiH for the year 2019¹³

were fighting with the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and were deported to BiH during the last couple of years. Some of the eminent security experts in BiH, like Dzevad Galijašević¹⁵, consistently claim that among the immigrants present in BiH, there must be former ISIL fighters present. This claim was confirmed in several cases by BiH authorities¹⁶.

The numbers given above prove several definitive conclusions:

1. The uprisings of the Arab Spring accompanied with the economic situations in the countries where it took place, followed by the war in Syria and the general instability of the region, have produced so far¹⁷ hundreds of thousands of migrants who would do whatever it takes to leave the region of the Middle East and reach Europe¹⁸;
2. Even if the influx of immigrants stopped now, it would be naive to expect that all those who have already reached so far, at the very entrance gate of the EU, will peacefully go back to their countries of origin;
3. The EU has still not reached any unanimously adopted agenda for the MENA immigration and humanitarian crisis management – all that has been done so far has been the budgets allocated to the transit countries mentioned above, which are essentially being paid to keep immigrants within their own borders.

Hungary

The Hungarian Government has a firm position that migration should not be supported and encouraged, but that it should instead be stopped¹⁹. It accused European left-wing parties of promoting multiculturalism without considering strengthening border protection or stopping illegal migration, dubbing the Hungary Helps Programme as a solution to the migration crisis, and noting that just recently it had helped 200 Syrian refugee families return to their homes.

Besides presenting immigrants as cultural (Tózsza-Sallai, 2018) and security threats, Hungary also presents them as a “very serious” health risk. “It is in Europe’s security interest to stop migration. The discussion should focus on stopping rather than handling migration” said Foreign Minister Szijjártó. The Visegrad Group has started cooperation with Morocco, Libya and Tunisia to curb the waves of illegal migration. Resettlement quotas should not be mandatory in the EU as this encourages human smugglers and migrants.²⁰

CAUSES OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION SENTIMENT IN EUROPE

What can be some of the causes of such an anti-immigrant sentiment that prevails in many European countries at the moment? According to Malnar and Malnar (2015) (as quoted in Petrovic, 2019), Southeastern European Countries (SEC) perceive migration as an important factor of a demographic change. Some authors claim that Europe is facing an identity crisis (Borborici, 2016), others argue that clashes between different ethnic-religious groups are imminent (Fox, 2018). The same argument has been given by Varshney (2009:278), who claims that ethnic conflicts are a more regular feature in pluralistic democracies. After 9/11, many see immigration to be in direct connection with possible Islamisation and the radicalization of societies (Rakic et al., 2012), perceiving it as a threat to their own security. Security is principally concerned with freedom from threat, and thus, whatever constitutes a threat is, de facto, a security issue (Buzan et al., 1998:23).

CONCLUSION

This paper claims that for the time being, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are the last barrier that still keeps unwanted immigrants out of the EU and its two main entrance points – Croatia and Hungary –, even admitting immigrants that both Hungary and Croatia have managed to push back out of their territories.

According to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), a human rights NGO based in Budapest, since 2016, Hungary has managed to push more than 50,000 people back to Serbia²¹.

One of the obvious and logical solutions, advocated by Hungary and its governmental programme Hungary Helps, would be to resolve the problems in the countries of origin, such as Syria, including rebuilding those countries and their economies and allowing its emigrants to go back home.

Another solution would be to relocate immigrants into the EU countries that are willing to receive them, even in numbers higher than the initial quotas provided, and stop forcing the countries that do not want immigrants within their borders, such as the V4 countries. Receiving countries should then be provided with additional financial aid from EU funds.

In this way, the agony would stop, people would be allocated to the countries that consider this option as viable and sustainable, and current transit countries that do suffer from the enormous numbers of immigrants on their territories would be also relieved from this kind of financial and social burden. Social stability tends to be disturbed as well due to the anti-immigrant sentiment prominently perceived within Christian communities of the countries concerned.

Until this scenario comes to life, the countries hit by the immigrant crisis will remain under these burdens. Although at the end of this chain, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia share the destiny of the countries that have no capacity to push the immigrants back or send them further into the EU.

Fighting illegal immigration pouring through smuggling networks, biases, and backlash toward immigration, they remain the last barrier to the waves of the illegal immigrants until, and if, a change of the situation occurs.

NOTES

- ¹ Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-on-new-balkan-route-stuck-in-limbo/a-44509373>
- ² <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/unicef-refugee-and-migrant-response-europe-humanitarian-situation-report-39-1-january>, visited on 25 May 2021
- ³ Available at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-sea/>
- ⁴ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/2d808a82-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/2d808a82-en>, OECDLibrary, visited on 25 May 2021
- ⁵ Available at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GA2021-Greece-eng.pdf>, p.3
- ⁶ UNHCR: Republic of North Macedonia Bi-annual Fact Sheet, February 2021, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/republic-north-macedonia/unhcr-republic-north-macedonia-bi-annual-fact-sheet-february-2021>
- ⁷ Available at <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2020/3/7/sjeverna-makedonija-nece-dozvoliti-ulazak-migranata>
- ⁸ Available at <https://www.danas.rs/svet/predsednik-severne-makedonije-ponovo-angazovao-vojsku-na-granici-zbog-migranata/>
- ⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/refugee-and-migrant-crisis>, visited on 20 May 2021
- ¹⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-monthly-update-january-february-2021>, visited on 18 April, 2021
- ¹¹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20212201_bosnia_short_note_acaps.pdf, visited on 18 April, 2021
- ¹² file/Downloads/bosnia_and_herzegovina_2021-02-10.pdf, European Commission site, visited on 18 April, 2021; https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/europe/bosnia-and-herzegovina_en
- ¹³ Available at <https://dijaspora.mhrr.gov.ba/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina-Migration-Profile-for-the-year-2019.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Marko Rakic & Dragisa Jurisic (2012) Wahhabism as a Militant Form of Islam on Europe's Doorstep, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:9, 650-663, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2012.702671
- ¹⁵ Dzevad Galijašević, *Epitaf za Bosnu: Bosna posle Alije i Bin Ladena*, 2017.
- ¹⁶ Detsche Welle, 20 Feb 2019, accessible at <https://>

- www.dw.com/hr/bih-teroristi-me%C4%91u-migrantima/a-47597431, visited on 29 April, 2021
- ¹⁷ “UN projections estimate that 500 to 750 million people will enter Europe in the future”, as quoted in David Vucic, Sigurnosna prijetnja hrvatskom prostoru, p. 5, 2019
- ¹⁸ Aleksandar Saša Gajć, Geopolitics of Syrian Migration and EU, Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade, 2016.
- ¹⁹ Retrieved on 21 may 2021 from <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/justice-minister-migration-should-not-be-encouraged-but-stopped>
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