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The Impact of the Refugee Crisis in the Balkans: A Drift Towards Security

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Abstract: During the course of approximately one year – from early 2015 until March 2016 – over 800,000 people crossed four countries on the Western Balkan route: Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. These countries' ability to organize the refugees' transit in an orderly manner was described as a humanitarian approach. Due to the transit nature of the passage of the refugees, the crisis could have been seen as having little impact on the countries beyond technical issues like registration, accommodation and transportation. This article, however, looks at what happened on the ground as the crisis was developing and in the year following the closure of the refugee route. It claims that the securitization of migration took place as a consequence of the refugee crisis. However, the securitization of migration in the Balkans has certain specifics. What kind of security discourse developed, and which policy measures were adopted? These aspects are analyzed in this article.

Keywords: refugee crisis, Balkans, security, migration, identity, economy, demography

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Introduction

The refugee wave to Europe in 2015 came via the Eastern Mediterranean. Syrian refugees accommodated in Turkey and neighboring countries started crossing the Aegean Sea in increasingly large numbers from early 2015. Once in Greece, they used a land route to make their way to Germany and other Western European countries.

From Greece, refugees crossed into Macedonia, walking and sometimes bicycling to Serbia, from where, again mostly by foot, they would cross into Hungary, from where it was relatively easy to reach Austria and Germany, as Hungary is in the Schengen Area.

One would expect that refugees from Turkey would more easily make their way towards Western Europe via Bulgaria and avoid making the perilous trip in small boats to Greece. However, in 2014, Bulgaria built the first part of a fence along the land border with Turkey, making this route, at the time, largely inaccessible to refugees.¹

In spring 2015, Hungary started complaining of a larger number of refugees arriving daily at its borders from Serbia. It first threatened and then erected a barbed-wire fence and closed the border with Serbia in mid-September 2015, causing a re-route. On the night of 16/17 September, thousands of refugees crossed into Croatia to further make their way to the Hungarian border. In response, Hungary started erecting a barbed-wire fence along the border with Croatia. A month later, the border was closed. This caused yet another re-route, and in the middle of October 2015, refugees started crossing Slovenia via Croatia to reach Western Europe.

The EU–Turkey deal in March 2016 effectively closed the Eastern Mediterranean route. Refugees continued to arrive but on a smaller scale.

The Balkans²

The Balkan region was traditionally a source of emigration and a transit route for out-of-region migrants. The ‘refugee crisis’³ in 2015/16 made the numbers of those transiting the region skyrocket. This created a sense of powerlessness in managing large human flows.

1 By June 2016, Bulgaria had built in total 146 km of barbed-wire border fence along its border with Turkey. See, for example, Thorpe 2016.

2 In relation to the refugee crisis, the geographical denomination of the route that included Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia was usually referred to as Western Balkan or simply a Balkan route. The use of the term Balkan in this paper in no way presumes any other connotation except this one. This clarification seems necessary as both Slovenia and Croatia on a number of occasions in the past made official statements that they do not consider themselves to be a part of the Balkans.

3 The 2015 refugee crisis is usually described in reference to the conflict in Syria. However, more specifically, the refugee crisis in this article refers to the incapacity of the European Union (EU) states to deal with a mass flow of humanity, their inability to cooperate and their weakness to uphold EU values.

Four of the countries in the region – Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia – became a part of the Western Balkan land route for refugee arrival into the EU. None of these countries felt it had any responsibility for the cause or an ability to solve the crisis. The refugees crossed these territories with only a fraction requesting asylum. Other countries in the region – Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) – were not directly affected in the sense that refugees crossed the territories of their states, but they felt vulnerable if the route changed to include them. The governments there took precautionary measures in terms of increasing border control, monitoring ‘green borders’, taking part in meetings at the European level and forming joint border controls with neighboring states.

As the crisis evolved, the nervousness grew. The lack of a European solution, mutual accusations, pleads for solidarity, anti-immigrant rhetoric, barbed wire, sinister images, appeals for upholding values and norms, and recalling personal tragedies from the wars in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia created a cacophony of messages confronting ordinary people on a daily basis.

With the EU–Turkey deal of March 2016, refugees ceased to come in such large numbers. Yet, the crisis left a bitter aftertaste that the world had changed and migration was here to stay. How to respond to new realities is still unclear.

For countries in the Balkans grappling with multiple transitions, institution building, economic development, democratic consolidation and the legacies of the wars in the 1990s the recent past has already delivered many significant challenges.. Adding to them the refugee crisis created at first a sense of detachment (not our problem) and, as the problem grew (a lack of EU-wide solutions and accompanying mutual accusations, terrorist attacks, radicalizing rhetoric, etc.), frustration and panic about what to do if the EU was not able to find a solution.

This paper looks at the discourse and policy developments in the four countries in light of the refugee crisis. It argues that the initial surprise and a qualified humanitarian approach, which amounted to the facilitation of transit, evolved into a security-driven narrative and policy decisions that would, in case of a new refugee wave, treat it predominantly as a security issue. The refugee crisis of 2015/16 was a novel experience Europe-wide and even more so for young countries in the Balkans. Traditionally, these countries had insular view of migration – migration was intra-regional for economic reasons and directed to third countries for both economic and political reasons. The wars in the 1990s produced hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons who found shelter across the world, the majority, however, in neighboring countries.⁴ The refugee crisis in 2015 created a completely new situation.

The securitization of migration is not a novel phenomenon; research on it has been devel-

4 Temporary accommodation in a large number of cases turned into permanent settlement. This experience contributes to fear that giving refugees temporary protection on the account of war in reality means their permanent stay.

oping in Europe since the mid-1970s. A framework allowing migration to be studied as a security topic was facilitated by the work of Barry Buzan and his colleagues. "Security is about survival", they noted.⁵ In other words, an issue becomes an object of security concern if it is "...presented as an existential threat to a designated referent object"⁶ What this leads to is that the securitization of topics "justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them."⁷

Securitization, to be clear, is not what these exponents of the Copenhagen School would advise or advocate for. They explained that securitization necessarily entails a shift from a regular political process towards a security domain. This is not good for democracy, argued Buzan et al. Instead, a goal should be to limit securitization of an issue and its return as early as possible into the framework of regular politics.

This is not always easily achieved as our understanding what security is has been broadened (as well as deepened) much beyond traditional concepts of military and defense.⁸ Migration has been emerging as a security topic *par excellence*. The securitization of migration, a view of migrants as terrorists and criminals, Huysmans explains, is "related to a wider politicization in which immigrants and asylum-seekers are portrayed as a challenge to protection of national identity and welfare provisions."⁹ Welfare chauvinism and the idea of cultural homogeneity as a stabilizing factor feed such convictions.¹⁰

Migration was securitized in the EU by the use of three related themes on internal security, cultural security and the crisis of the welfare state. Together, these themes have been used to depict migrants as potential contributors to terrorist activities and organized crime; as a threat to the cultural identity of society because of their different cultural background; and as people who reap the benefits of the welfare system illegitimately and who commit welfare fraud to exploit the system.¹¹

This paper argues that following the refugee crisis of 2015/16, securitization of migration has been taking place in the Balkans. However, the dynamic is not the same in each country, and the basis for the securitization of migration is not necessarily driven by the same concerns as explained in the countries with long immigration tradition.

This paper proceeds in several steps. The second section gives a brief overview of the political situation during the refugee crisis in each of the four countries: Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. This offers insight into the domestic situations, attitudes towards

5 Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde 1998, 21.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 Buzan *et al.* 1998 write about political, economic, societal and environmental aspects of security studies.

9 Huysmans 2000, 751.

10 *Ibid.*, 753.

11 Genç 2017, 247.

neighbors and responses to broader EU policies. The third section discusses security aspects of the effects of the refugee crisis. The fourth section looks at economy-related debate triggered by the refugee crisis set in a broader framework than a debate on prevention of abuse of social benefits. Unlike in traditional immigration countries, where securitization is linked to fears of abuse of social welfare systems, in the Balkans fear of migration means primarily the fear of continuing emigration, demographic decline and aging, rather than the prospect of a large number of people settling in any of the countries. The conclusion sums up the analysis the effects of the refugee crisis in the Balkans and indicates possible long-term trends in tackling migration.

Dynamics in the Four Countries

Macedonia

Macedonia was experiencing a profound political crisis in the spring of 2015 when refugees started crossing its territory in ever-increasing numbers. Preoccupied with domestic political problems, the politicians and public alike have devoted little attention to the plight of the individuals illegally using its territory to cross over into Serbia. The threat was judged minor and certainly of less importance than corruption scandals among senior officials in the government. The opposition SDSM (social-democrats) released a series of tapes revealing the government's abuse of office. "The allegations include vote-rigging, bribery and making illicit recordings of more than 20,000 people."¹² Weeks after the tapes had caused uproar within society, an odd and dangerous incident took place in the town of Kumanovo. Allegedly, a group of Albanian insurgents illegally entered the country with the mission of stirring inter-ethnic violence in this ethnically mixed community. A violent clash ended with the deaths of eight police officers and ten attackers.¹³ The terrorist attack, as described by the government, shifted attention from a political to a security crisis, yet even further from the plight of refugees walking along railway tracks on their way to Serbia.

Confronted with increasing numbers of arrivals however, in June 2015 Macedonian authorities introduced legal changes permitting refugees presence in the country for a period of 72 hours from the moment of registration. This also allowed for their legal use of public transportation, and the Macedonian railways made use of the sudden demand for its service. The price of a single ticket increased over the course of a few months from 5 to 25 Euros, making the national railways profitable for the first time in years.¹⁴ This, at one point, caused protests from taxi drivers, who, by then, were making extraordinary profits by charging large sums to drive refugees to the Serbian border. The railway was closed for two days due to a blockade created by taxi drivers. It was reopened only after the govern-

12 De Launey 2015.

13 Mejdini 2016.

14 Marušić 2015.

ment reached an agreement with taxi drivers on sharing the market for transportation.¹⁵

During the summer of 2015, the Macedonian government made a couple of interventions on its border with Greece, trying to manage and stem the flow of refugees as a reaction to criticism and pleas coming from some EU member states, primarily Hungary, but also Austria. In August, in an attempt to slow down the rate of arrival of refugees, the Macedonian authorities deployed army troops, causing violent protests from refugees.¹⁶ In response, the Macedonian government sent additional forces with the authorization to use tear gas and deafening hand grenades. With scenes of violence and an outcry from human rights organizations, the army withdrew, but the public attention and governmental engagement in the refugee crisis was constant from then on.

The continuous inflow of refugees made the government nervous, adding to the already precarious political situation in the country. There was pressure that something needed to be done and, short of a European-wide solution, the government in Macedonia started to be ever more critical of the EU and its policies. In a situation where Macedonia had been standing as an official candidate for EU membership since 2005, blocked by its neighbor Greece, there was little Macedonia was willing to offer to such an undeserving EU. Criticism was consistent in that Macedonia, a non-EU Member State, was defending Europe from Europe, referring to the fact that Greece, an EU Member State, was unable to stem down the inflow of refugees and that pressure was pushed on to Macedonia to protect Europe.¹⁷

Criticism of the EU was also meant to communicate to the Macedonian public that the government, criticized by the very EU for its undemocratic political practice, was upholding EU values, confirming that the EU was not a consistent, fair and reliable partner. If it were otherwise, the EU would have been able to agree to allow Macedonia to start negotiations for EU membership.

Frustration among some EU member states resonated with Macedonia, and during the winter of 2015/16, the Macedonian government accepted the additional police force offered by Visegrad countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Austria, Croatia and Slovenia.

Yet, taming the flow was made possible only when all countries on the Western Balkan route - at meetings in late February 2016 in Vienna and Belgrade - decided to coordinate activities and close their borders. Greece was not invited to any of the meetings. Germany and the EU protested unilateral measures, but the humanitarian catastrophe was hanging over the Idomeni area at the Greek side of the border. The EU–Turkey deal of 18 March 2016 halted the crisis.

15 MIA 2016.

16 Jordanovska 2015.

17 Ivanov 2016.

Serbia

Serbia tolerated quite peacefully the arrival of refugees in the course of the spring and early summer of 2015. Refugees were finding their way to the border with Hungary, assisted by individuals with entrepreneurial spirit offering transportation services. It was, however, a host of humanitarian organizations and volunteers who helped refugees on a daily basis. This included ordinary citizens, who without reservation handed them food and clothes; in a number of cases, they offered an opportunity to spend a night in a bed and to take a proper shower.

In the summer of 2015, refugees were sleeping in Belgrade parks, with much attention given in the media. Officials visited them to check their wellbeing and, in response to reporters' questions, unequivocally concluded that, unlike many other European countries, people in Serbia were welcoming and generous to refugees, remembering their own plight in the wars in the 1990s.¹⁸

The discourse in Serbia was driven by two key notions: one was that Serbian citizens empathized with refugees, remembering the refugee waves in Serbia during the wars in the 1990s. The other narrative thread was that Serbia has demonstrated itself to be a reliable and responsible European state – one that will conclude negotiations and become a member state of the EU.

Yet, Serbia, like Macedonia, did not feel responsible for the crisis that was evolving in front of its eyes and felt that it did not have the capacity to solve it. The maximum, as was explained, was to treat the unfortunate people with dignity and empathy, trying to help if they could and certainly not to make their transit more difficult than it already was.

Hungary's growing anxiety with the daily arrival of thousands of people on its borders was received with understanding from the Serbian side. Still, Serbia's position was that refugees should be allowed to transit and reach their final destinations in Austria, Germany and other countries.

Once the border with Hungary had been closed, refugees found their way to Croatia, which, although expecting redirection of the route, felt overwhelmed with 11,000 people crossing its eastern border in the course of one night. The outcry from the Croatian government was strong, and a Serbian response was expected.

Serbian officials explained that Serbia had for months been exposed to daily arrivals of tens of thousands of people on its borders and had not panicked, unlike Croatia, which, after one day of receiving refugees, was in a mess. The unilateral border closure from the Croatian side was reciprocated.

The commotion within Croatia was ascribed to the nervousness of the Croatian government pending the parliamentary elections in November 2015. The verbal war did not help previously deteriorating relations, nor did the fact that the conservative Serbian government had little sympathy for the outgoing social-liberal government in Croatia.

18 B92 2016.

A couple of days later, the two countries reopened their borders, allowing interior ministries to resume communication and the coordination of activities. Croatia was keen, being in the midst of an election campaign, to demonstrate ability and capacity to organize refugee transit in a humane and orderly manner. Serbia also started to organize the transportation of refugees from the border with Macedonia to the border with Croatia. The transportation, however, was not free of charge – refugees had to cover the cost of their transportation.

The growing uneasiness in the EU with the inability to find a common solution for the refugee crisis left Serbia in the minority of those countries that, despite fears and limited resources, retained the basic humanitarian approach.¹⁹

Serbia's efforts were recognized in Brussels, and in light of the fact that Serbia expected the opening of its first accession chapters in December 2015, this approach of Serbia was more than welcome among EU officials and the European public. Serbia was behaving in a European way when many EU member states were not, commented its foreign minister. However, it was also continually stressed that Serbia would not under any circumstances agree to become a hotspot or "a parking lot for refugees".²⁰

Serbia was given the green light for opening chapters 23 and 24 in December 2015 and announced extraordinary parliamentary elections in the spring of 2016. The regular arrival of several thousand people on a daily basis was no longer a surprise, and media and political attention shifted to domestic issues, pending the closure of the route in March 2016.

Croatia

Croatia, as noted, was preparing for parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2015 when refugees started arriving on its territory. The government's consistent discourse was one of calm and order in an effort to send the message of ability and competence in handling the crisis. The initial shock when 11,000 refugees arrived in one night was quickly restored to the position that Croatia could handle the crisis. This attitude remained a constant characteristic of the Croatian approach. In the matter of a few days since the arrival of the first refugees in Croatia, a reception center was opened in Opatovci,²¹ to which all refugees were sent. After that, refugees entered and left Croatia in organized transport. This meant that most of Croatian citizens saw refugees on screens rather than seeing them on streets of their villages and towns.

19 This was the conclusion of the study on refugees in Serbia in 2016 published by the Centre for Applied Social Research (full reference Vuletić *et al.* in bibliography). The study, however, found that regarding migrants settling in Serbia, 53 % of respondents thought that it was the responsibility of international organizations to teach them Serbian. The study also found that 68.5 % of respondents thought that local populations should have priority in employment. 79 % of respondents thought that migration was a long-term trend, not a temporary crisis.

20 ANSA 2016; Reuters 2015.

21 Later in 2015, a winter reception centre in Slavonski Brod became operational.

However, the Croatian president, coming from the main opposition party, HDZ, was critical of the way that the government led by social democrats handled the crisis. This stance was partially driven by a desire to assist the party she came from in the election, but even more an articulation of a different worldview.²²

The discourse in Croatia, just like in Serbia, was driven by two main ideas. The first one was in reference to the refugee experience of tens of thousands of Croatian citizens in the 1990s. The second was the responsibility towards Europe but qualified – it was not a member of the Schengen Area as Hungary and Slovenia; thus, its responsibility was legally reduced. However, it was an EU member state, which meant that it referred to EU membership as a framework in which it fulfilled its own responsibility. Croatia also used the crisis to demonstrate to its neighbors, primarily Serbia, that as an EU member state, its position was not the same as non-EU member states.²³

The media and public attention on the plight of refugees was thriving: crews were in the field filming and reporting the treatment of the Croatian police and the response from humanitarian organizations and volunteers. Although the attention did not die out during the crisis, it became repetitive after a while – a humanitarian approach, well-organized transit, marginal incidents and a plea for a European solution.

The opposition was much more critical than the situation justified, and most citizens concurred. The issue of migration, as much as would be expected, did not significantly influence the outcome of the election. Croatia was reliving its ghosts from the past, and issues from the Second World War were dominant in the election campaign. A new conservative government, however, continued the same approach to the refugee crisis. An interior minister, just as his predecessor, was in the field, overseeing the organization of the reception and transit of refugees, giving messages of calm and order. He was also constantly underlining the Croatian humanitarian approach to the crisis, recalling the experience that Croatian citizens had encountered as refugees and displaced people themselves only two decades earlier. The government also did not hesitate to explain that only in Croatia were refugees not asked to cover any costs for accommodation and transportation – the Croatian state was covering all the costs. This was further evidence that Croatia was doing all it could to share the burden and to contribute constructively to the European solution.²⁴

22 What is interesting in the case of Croatia is not that there are different, all legitimate, views on important issues such as migration. What is interesting when assessing the discourse of the Croatian president is the insistence primarily on the security of citizens and the protection of Croatia. This nation-first approach drifts from the standard EU-unity-first approach that Croatian citizens have been used to. One can only speculate, but with a high degree of certainty, that if Croatia were still an acceding country to the EU, the discourse of all key political actors would be in unison and would insist on Croatia being a constructive partner to the EU, rather than one that primarily focuses on its own interests.

23 This is, obviously, a fact. Yet, the tone of the message sent from Croatia to Serbia carried a sense of superiority and a certain level of arrogance. This was not helpful. It did not help to improve bilateral relations, did not facilitate cooperation in handling refugees, certainly irritated the other side (as well as Brussels and other EU capitals) and did not contribute to political success domestically, although this was the primary goal of both PM Milanović and the president.

24 Toma 2016.

Slovenia

Slovenia was urging that a common solution needed to be found before refugees arrived on its territory. When they did enter Slovenia in October 2015, the next day, passenger train transportation with Croatia was suspended, and Slovenia loudly complained of the lack of cooperation from the Croatian side.

In the matter of a few days, at the request of the Slovenian government, a meeting of all countries of the Balkan route and several EU member states took place in Brussels with the goal of increasing operational collaboration. The meeting was concluded with a 17-point action plan that was to serve as a blueprint for enhanced cooperation and communication along the route.

This agreement did improve relations among neighbors, but Slovenia continued to exert pressure that a more comprehensive solution needed to be found. "It is essential to ensure the unobstructed passage of refugees, as Slovenia is the smallest country along the Balkan migration route with very limited capacity to accommodate and assist refugees. ... any congestion resulting from an imbalance between the inflow and outflow of refugees could threaten the security of Slovenia as well as the wider European region," warned the Slovenian prime minister.²⁵

Humanitarian organizations and volunteers helped refugees in the field, yet the media and politicians were more reserved in their messages of empathy than was the case in both Serbia and Croatia. The discourse in Slovenia was primarily about security and the necessity to stem the number of refugees arriving on a daily basis. Slovenia's position was justified by the fact that, as a small country, it felt an extraordinary and disproportionate burden of catering, even just in transit, for thousands of refugees. It also maintained the view that as part of the Schengen Area, it had more responsibility for protecting the common borders and the security of its own and citizens of other European states.²⁶

The Refugee Crisis as a Threat to Internal Security

The concern that migration could undermine the internal security of EU member states has been steadily growing for several decades. As a combination of internal policy-making and changes in the external environment, various bodies within the EU "produced and distributed internal security knowledge that articulated a continuum between borders, terrorism, crime and migration."²⁷ Conflicts and instability in the European neighborhood have not only pushed more people towards Europe, but they have facilitated the creation of groups who propagate radical ideology and carry out deadly terrorist attacks in their

25 Government of Slovenia, Press Release, 10 November 2015 http://www.vlada.si/en/media_room/government_press_releases/press_release/article/construction_of_physical_barriers_on_the_schengen_border_a_necessary_temporary_measure_56924/.

26 DW 2016; Milekić 2016.

27 Huysmans 2000, 761.

lands as well as on the territory of Europe. Immigrants are, therefore, increasingly seen as people who demonstrate a higher likelihood to commit terrorist acts or perform other criminal activities.

Terminology was an indication of decision-makers' political position. In most cases, the use of the word refugee carried an appeal to the norms and values of the EU, to the legal obligation to implement domestic laws and to the general notion of solidarity and humanity. The use of the word migrant, on the other hand, indicated the notion that a person's entry into a country is permitted only under certain conditions and that the country is under no moral or legal obligation to allow the massive or undocumented entry of people on its territory.

In the Balkans, the refugee crisis raised two types of fear. One fear was that the refugee crisis could trigger new conflicts among neighbors who had not yet fully reconciled after the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The refugee crisis could trigger conflicts in the Balkan countries due to their mutual lack of trust, grievances, contested borders and many unsettled issues from the past, as well as through influence from some EU-unfriendly states.²⁸

A view from within the region, resonating with security fears in other parts of Europe, was that the refugee crisis may serve as an importer of insecurity. Images of people in need of protection were mixed with images of undocumented, unregistered young males posing a threat. From the Paris attacks in November 2015 and the Cologne 2016 New Year incidents to the Brussels airport attack in April 2016, the July 2016 attack in Nice and the Manchester attack in May 2017, every next terrorist attack generated more fear of uncontrolled immigration.

Refugee Crisis as a Trigger for Conflict in the Balkans

German Chancellor Merkel warned that the refugee crisis could spark a new conflict in the Balkans.²⁹ Whether the warning was genuine or only symbolic in the atmosphere of high tension is not crucial. What is more important is that it highlighted the regional vulnerability, despite years of investment in the politics of stability and regional cooperation.

The refugee crisis exerted extraordinary pressure on the governments in the region, and more assistance from the EU was expected. Yet, short of an EU-wide solution, the countries feared that refugees would be stranded in their territories once Austria, Germany and others had closed their borders.

Official statements in the four countries were similar – the government was responsible, it undertook its share of burden, but it would not, at any point, accept catering for the crisis disproportionately.

The status of being an EU member state or not did not significantly influence individual

28 De Borja Lasheras 2016; Wunsch and Dimitrov 2016.

29 Withnall 2015.

countries' responses. Broadly, Macedonia and Slovenia, a candidate and an EU member state respectively, for different reasons both had stronger security concerns in handling the refugee crisis, while Serbia and Croatia, again a candidate and an EU member state respectively, despite their mutual rhetorical wars, both maintained a more humanitarian-oriented approach towards refugees. EU membership was thus not decisive in how a country handled the crisis. In particular, lacking an EU-wide solution, countries felt additional pressure to design their own solutions, protecting their national interests. Yet, this was an impossible task, as the nature of the refugee crisis meant that no single country could solve it individually. As was repeated many times, a solution had to be sought through cooperation.

The necessity of cooperation is one lesson learned from the 2015/16 refugee crisis in the Balkans. Not that this was novel or that this knowledge contributed to resolving bilateral disputes in the region. Yet, a sense that there was no way out except through cooperation (as the 2014 floods also demonstrated) was once again confirmed.

Security Concerns Generated by the Refugee Crisis

The refugee crisis in the summer of 2015 only added to the multiple challenges that the EU was confronting (Brexit, the Greek debt crisis, the conflict in Ukraine and difficulties in upgrading the common asylum and migration system). The failure to come up with common solutions raised suspicions about the ability of European leaders to resolve these crises. Populists and demagogues gained strength through the weakness of the establishment. Extremism and radicalization among certain sectors of the population in Europe certainly needed to be addressed. However, the discourse used by populists and extremists does not aid efforts to respond to problems constructively. Radicalization and extremism grow through fear of the 'other', whoever the 'other' is.³⁰ Fear, as explained in the literature, strengthens the securitization of migration.³¹

Critics of the liberal approach to the refugee crisis received attention across the media spectrum, not just from conservative media outlets. Politicians and activists advocating for solidarity with refugees had to explain that these were terrorist incidents, that refugees are like all other people - there are good and bad ones.³²

Yet, the security concern only grew with reports of actual or possible new terrorist attacks in Europe. Reports on Salafist communities in some parts of the Balkans and radicalization and extremism instigated by returning ISIL soldiers added to the growing fear. Although the overall number of former ISIL soldiers in the region numbers several hundred³³ (this is only an approximation, as the exact number is difficult to establish), there is a growing fear that they may commit terrorist attacks or inspire others to carry them out.

30 Postelnicescu 2016.

31 Huysmans 2000.

32 Kranjec 2016.

33 Petrovic 2016.

As much as the debate on radicalization should not have been part of the debate on the refugee crisis, the discourse was not void of it. Due to populism, negative propaganda or sheer ignorance, the argument of region-bred terrorism and radicalism was increasingly framed in the context of degrading security in Europe and in this region, which the refugee crisis only exacerbated.

The security debate also included the discussion of criminal networks of smugglers trafficking weapons, drugs and humans across the region.³⁴ The Balkan route is recognized for the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons and the illicit trafficking of goods and people, which fuel crime and insecurity.³⁵ This was only furthered by the presence of refugees.³⁶ The closure of the Greek–Macedonian border cut down the number of refugees, but the criminal networks continued to operate, only at a higher price.

Frontex has cooperated with border police and governments in the region to prevent arms trafficking, and its activities have resulted in the seizure of weapons, explosives, grenades and ammunition pieces.³⁷ To tackle criminal networks, different initiatives were launched. The Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre increased bilateral and multilateral contacts in the region, the comprehensive exchange of information between police chiefs, and cooperation and communication between border authorities.³⁸

Post-refugee Crisis Developments

In the aftermath of the refugee crisis, there has been a visible shift towards a security-driven view of migration. In the event of a new refugee crisis or the intensified migration pressure, the governments in the Balkans appear to, almost unequivocally, support the use of more forceful measure to tackle a possible flow of people. There has been intensified cooperation in locating and apprehending people smugglers and in fighting irregular migration in general. Void of a common asylum policy, the EU has decided either to ignore or to tacitly approve measures (tightening of borders, pushbacks) taken by Balkan countries in stemming the number of asylum seekers in the EU.³⁹

Although Hungary has been broadly criticized for its aggressive anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, the spirit of Orbanism has been permeating the Balkans.⁴⁰ Croatia, having drifted away from its largely compassionate and humane treatment of refugees in transit, in the spring of 2016 adopted amendments to the Law on Defense which allowed the army in extraordinary circumstances to assist the police in controlling the border. In a broader context of harmonizing the Aliens Act with EU legislation, Croatian authorities attempt-

34 Jovanovic 2015; Dragojlo 2016; Tomovic 2016.

35 UNODC 2014.

36 Mandić 2017.

37 FRONTEX 2016.

38 European Commission 2016.

39 Weber 2017, 11.

40 Slapšak 2016.

ed to introduce changes to the Act in such a way as to ‘criminalize solidarity’. Due to criticism from humanitarian and human rights organizations, the adoption of the modified Aliens Act was postponed in early 2017. Slovenia, in this respect, was more successful. First, at the beginning of the refugee crisis, the Slovenian parliament adopted temporary measures to employ the army at the borders. In January 2017, in one additional step to deter refugees in case of emergency, the Parliament adopted amendments to the Aliens Act which give authority to the government to decline admission into the country to foreigners who do not meet the entry criteria and to automatically expel irregular migrants.⁴¹ In the same motion, the State Border Control Act was modified giving police more legal instruments to use in an event of an increased migration pressure. Slovenia also partially erected a border fence with Croatia to prevent illegal entry into the country.

From late 2016 Croatia started to systematically push back refugees to Serbia across the green border. Human rights organizations report confiscation of mobile phones, migrants being stripped of their clothes, intimidated and generally violently forced back to Serbia.⁴² The policy of pushbacks, however, seems to have been most frequent in Macedonia and Serbia, occurring sometimes on daily basis, as the two countries experience a continued influx of irregular migrants. Macedonia is pushing back refugees to Greece or pushing them forward to Serbia. Serbia, on its part, is pushing them back to Macedonia. This has resulted in what is described as ping pong exercise with migrants.⁴³ In the summer of 2016 Serbia, as a reaction to Hungary’s additional measures against illegal crossings of its border, authorized joint army and police patrols at its borders with Macedonia and Bulgaria. “Serbia does not want to become a collective center for migrants”, explained the prime minister.⁴⁴ Visegrad countries and Austria continued to assist Macedonian police in controlling its borders.

A Threat to National Identity

How does one preserve one’s own identity in an increasingly globalized world? This question is often posed by anti-immigrant politicians and activists who advocate closure of borders as a way to preserve one’s own nation’s identity.⁴⁵

The refugee crisis was a trigger for populist discourse throughout Europe. The Balkans was no exception. “Is it human that refugees, that is migrants, do not respect Croatian flag, Croatian police officers that they break into police cordons, stone journalists, dictate how a sovereign country should behave?” asked one politician.⁴⁶ Another warned:

41 Sesar 2017.

42 Human Rights Watch 2017. Welcome and Are You Syrious NGO initiatives issued two reports in the early 2017 documenting and describing forceful push-backs conducted by the Croatian police.

43 Weber 2017, 19.

44 Reuters 2016.

45 It is a completely different question if a nation’s identity *should* be preserved.

46 Interview with Damir Kajin, president of a newly formed party Istrian Democrats and a former MP, *Nacional*, 22 September 2015 <http://www.nacional.hr/intervju-damir-kajin-udomio-bih-izbjeglice-ali-granicu-je-trebalo-zatvoriti-milanovic-ugrozava-nacionalnu-sigurnost-zemlje/>.

“There are millions of people in Asia and Africa who want to come to Europe. We fail to consider that these people will flood Europe, that these people are significantly more biologically superior to Europeans, in other words, they have more children. It is very good to have many children, but in addition to demographic, there is also a cultural policy. We like the mentality we have in Croatia.”⁴⁷

The Catholic Church both in Slovenia and Croatia was, in principle, pleading for solidarity and assistance to refugees in the spirit of Christianity, but enthusiasm to support Pope Francis in his consistent and generous appeals was not matched by the same level of enthusiasm from clerics in these countries. A priest and the editor-in-chief of a Catholic weekly, *Glas Koncila*, warned in their editorial that refugees are “...people suitable to realize goals of ideology of globalization whose intention is not only to destroy families, nations, nation states, cultural identity, but may also, even more so, have the intention to destroy monotheistic religions, in particular Christianity in all its forms.”⁴⁸ Islamic Communities, on their part, were the ones demonstrating more solidarity probably due to the fact that most refugees were Muslims, but they kept a low public profile. With few notable exceptions, neither the Orthodox Churches in Serbia and Macedonia were particularly vocal in pleading to assist refugees.

Economy-related Concerns Raised by the Refugee Crisis

The debate on the economic consequences of the refugee crisis barely deflected the debate in Western Europe. The main preoccupation within the Balkans concerned labor emigration and negative demographics which started to be seen as alarming if migration was to become a long-term drama of which the refugee crisis was just the first act. The possibility of refugees taking jobs from locals was not seriously discussed, as most refugees only passed through this region. The debate on the economy in relation to the refugee crisis, however, was driven by the notion that something needed to be done today in order to avoid problems for tomorrow. Apocalyptic scenarios sketched the future of the Balkans in dark colors: passive lands of elderly people who are bitter about the present, fearful of the future and nostalgic of the past.

47 Ladislav Ilčić, president of a small conservative party HRAST who was in the governing coalition at the time of the interview, N1 television, 4 December 2015 <http://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/ovo-je-7-skandaloznih-izjava-iz-domoljubne-koalicije-o-izbjeglicama-i-muslimanima-zbog-kojih-je-reagirao-i-karamarko/>.

48 Ivan Miklenić quoted in *Telegram*, 28 September 2017 <http://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/glas-koncila-je-objasnio-svoj-stav-o-izbjeglickoj-krizi-i-nema-puno-veze-s-humanimstavom-pape-franje/>.

Asylum Seekers from the Region

In recent years there has been a surge of people from the Balkans applying for asylum in the EU, mostly in Germany. Their number dramatically grew in 2015. On the one hand, the job market and the Balkan diaspora have been pull factors for emigration from the region. On the other hand, low trust in public institutions, nepotism, corruption, weak democracy, poverty, deindustrialization and unemployment exacerbate a prospect for economic wellbeing of these countries. Due to the lack of will or ability of the governments in the Balkans to solve these problems, emigration, especially of the young and educated, continues.⁴⁹

During the period 2014–2016, almost 40 % of all registered asylum seekers in Germany came from the Balkans: Albania with 12.2 % and Kosovo with 7.6 % held the second and third places respectively, after migrants from Syria. However, as Western Balkans are recognized as ‘safe countries of origin,’ there was a low rate of asylum acceptance (0.3 % for Serbia, Macedonia and B&H, and 0.2 % for Kosovo).⁵⁰ Applying for asylum, thus, is not a way for people in the Balkans to emigrate to Germany, but the job market is. They can legally seek employment in Germany, including for unskilled jobs, and they continue to do so in large numbers.

The refugee crisis caused lively debate: can Balkan countries imagine the import of a workforce from non-traditional lands of immigration (i.e. outside its neighborhood)? What would be the broader consequences of such policies beyond purely economic ones? What policies are governments designing to keep educated young people at home or to attract professionals from other countries? A more dynamic, less parochial view of migration policies was advocated by economic experts and business persons who see a significant potential for economic growth through well-designed migration policies.⁵¹

49 Taleski 2016; Marciacq *et al.* 2016.

50 Serbia is in sixth place with 3.8 % and Macedonia is in ninth place with 2.1 % of asylum seekers in Germany in the indicated period. See “The 2015 Migration Report”, Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

51 Duka 2016; Penava 2011.

Demography

All countries in the region grapple with bleak demographic trends.⁵² The combination of an aging population and a low birth rate, coupled with emigration, causes existential fears.⁵³

The refugee crisis, indirectly, accentuated debates of the need to seek solutions that would ensure the longevity and prosperity of nations. It is now taken for granted that these countries will have to import labor. What is debated is how to avoid the problems that West European countries have with immigration: namely: immigration being strong and integration of immigrants weak. One solution would be to attract returnees from the diaspora - following the Irish and Israeli models.⁵⁴ Another solution would be to apply selective immigration policies where a country accepts labor from countries with a similar cultural background.⁵⁵ Stimulating birth rate at home, however, seems to be the most desired policy.⁵⁶ Scholars were not the only ones alarmed at negative demographic trends – the Catholic Church and the Croatian president have spoken emotionally about the slow death of the nation if something is not done. The Croatian government seems to have heeded the advice – in late 2016 they established a new ministry of demography whose main task is to design policies that would stimulate birth rate. The media in Serbia also regularly runs stories of an aging population and emigration from the country. Macedonia had an internal debate, however, on the birth rate of its different ethnic people, while the net migration flow in Slovenia, despite the aging of the population and the low birth rate, is not as dramatic as in Serbia and Croatia. None of these is a new story but the sense of alarm was accentuated by the refugee crisis and the imminent migration pressure that is believed will be directed towards Europe in the coming years.

Stronger anti-immigration sentiments in these countries are not growing because migrants do not consider them attractive as final destinations for settlement. Yet, this seems a sad solace – to rely on underdevelopment and poverty as an insurance against immigration is a missed opportunity, to say the least.

52 Lukic *et al.* 2012.

53 UN 2015. The average annual rates of population change in the period 2010–2015, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Albania -0.04%, Bosnia and Herzegovina -0.13, Croatia -0.36, Macedonia 0.16, Serbia -0.47 and Slovenia 0.15.

54 Šterc and Komušanac, 2012, 708.

55 Stjepan Šterc, a demographer, in a roundtable discussion „Demography and Migration“ that took place on April 7, 2017 in Split in organization of Split-Makarska Archdiocese.

56 Anđelko Akrap, demographer, on Croatian television, October 10, 2016.

Conclusion

The refugee crisis in 2015/16 was an extraordinary experience for Europe and for four of the countries in the Balkans. They are small and young countries trying to navigate in the turbulent waters of world affairs. Conflict, political instability, poverty and climate change will continue to uproot people. The growing birth rate in the developing world will continue to exert a migratory pressure on Europe, from which its southeast corner will not be excluded.⁵⁷ Populism permeates politics even in countries with entrenched democracy. The election of an isolationist president in the US, the decision of UK citizens to seek their destiny outside the EU, the anti-Brussels policies of the Visegrad countries, Russia and China's active presence in the Balkans – all these contribute to a sense of bewilderment with only one reflex – how to cater for one's own interests the best one can. The refugee crisis added to a sense of helplessness on how to respond to ongoing challenges.

The first observation after the refugee crisis is that the Balkan countries were only a transit route. Very few people decided to stay. The governments expressed a deep conviction that their contributions in solving the refugee crisis could only be temporal and limited due to the fact that they had no responsibility for the crisis nor economic means to tackle it.

The second observation was that membership in the EU was not the deciding factor in terms of the approach taken to the crisis. Slovenia and Croatia, as EU member states, had different initial responses to the refugee crisis, just as there were different responses from the EU candidate states of Macedonia and Serbia. Both Serbia and Croatia, a candidate and an EU member state respectively, demonstrated a more humanitarian approach (on the grounds, of course, that refugees did not stay in their territories). On the other hand, Macedonia and Slovenia, a candidate and an EU member state respectively, demonstrated a security-dominant approach in response to the refugee crisis. Consequently, however, all four countries moved towards a security-driven approach to migration.

The third observation relates to the long-term migration trends. There is a clear sense of the inevitability of immigration in Europe and thus possibly in the Balkans. Yet, with little prior experience and few positive examples from countries with longer immigration histories, the Balkan countries fear immigration, in particular from geographically and culturally more-distant nations.

How solutions will be designed remains to be seen. Obviously, they will not be sought in a vacuum. The experiences, successes and failures of other countries will be observed. The ability of the EU to sustain integration without compromising its core values will reflect on the Balkans. However, the main responsibility to adapt to the challenges lies with these countries and their peoples.

57 NATO Revija 2011; UN 2015.

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