The Current Situation Concerning Illegal Migration in the Balkans

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Abstract

The research focus of this chapter covers the phenomenon of illegal migration as an asymmetrical threat. It considers the importance of the Balkan region as a transit zone to the countries of the European Union, and presents some of the weakness in the current situation as well as providing indications of possible solutions. The hypothesis is that the lack of a clear and coordinated strategy at the European Union level, in terms of dealing with the problem of illegal migration, affects the situation regarding this phenomenon which has deteriorated and is complicated in every aspect. The increase in the flow of refugees from the Middle East (Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan) and illegal migrants from North Africa will continue to be one of the key problems for the European Union and the transit countries of the Balkans. The Balkans will continue to be affected, primarily as a transit destination for a large number of refugees/migrants who intend to go to Western Europe, but probably some of them will want to stay in some of the countries of the region as asylum seekers. It is expected that this reality will adversely affect the socio-economic and security situation. Because of the involvement of local logistical networks, the increasing number of refugees/migrants will further intensify crime and corruption in the transit countries in the Balkans. The key point of this research is based on the hypothesis that a more significant strategy in dealing with the phenomenon of illegal migration could hardly be carried out without completing the entire geopolitical space of the European continent. Thus, we recommend that the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union has to be an imperative rather than a long-term strategy of Brussels, as it is at present. The research framework of the phenomenon of illegal migration involves using the method of content analysis and a critical review of the way this issue is tackled on a European level.

Keywords: illegal migration, Balkans, European Union, integrations, security, asymmetric threats.

Introduction

The ongoing dynamics of the armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan lie behind the increased number of refugees who pose a risk to the Balkans as the transit region to EU member states that are their final destination. The largest numbers continue to come from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, but there are also significant numbers of so-called economic migrants coming from countries from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa too. The countries most affected are Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece followed by the rest of the Balkan countries, including the Republic of Macedonia as the main transit route into Western Europe (UNHCR, 2015). The majority of refugees continue to arrive from the Near East, but there are also records of increasing numbers of migrants coming from North Africa and Asia. As EU member states, Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria continue to face an increased influx of refugees/migrants, some of whom continue migrating directly to Western Europe, while others transit via the Balkans. As a transit zone on the migrants' way to EU, the Balkans continue to face the increasing trend of the influx of migrants. The increased workload of the security authorities who deal with this problem along with the joint actions taken on a regional level have not made significant progress (Lembovska, 2013). On the other hand, the lack of any clear and coordinated strategy from the EU on illegal migration makes the current state of affairs even more complex and alarming (IOM, 2013, p. 7). The question whether or not a comprehensive strategy for dealing with an asymmetrical threat such as illegal migration is at all possible is a key one, especially without having adopted regulations valid across all states on the territory of Europe (Haselbah, 2015). We believe it is difficult to take any serious steps in combating illegal migration without the previous integration of the entire geopolitical space of continental Europe within the EU. By this, we primarily refer to the western Balkan countries that, for various reasons, still remain outside the EU since, as we shall see, the Balkans is an open door not only to illegal migration, but to other criminal activities within the EU member states (Select Committee on the European Union, 2012, p. 58).

Illegal Migration in the Balkans and Related Problems

Turkey is one of the most affected countries that, from the start of the conflict in Syria to present, has seen approximately 1.5 million refugees for whom the Turkish budget has so far spent approximately $3.5 billion (UNHCR, 2015). These numbers are on the increase as a result of the attack of the so-

called Islamic state in June, 2014, the aerial attacks on Iraq, and the battles in Kobane. The majority refugees of are Kurds from Syria going to EU as their final destination, predominantly to Germany and Italy, due to the presence of Kurdish ethnic communities within these countries.

Bulgaria faces serious problems too, arising from the increased trend of migrants/refugees entering the country from Turkey. At present, there is an increased trend of illegal sea crossings between Turkey and Bulgaria (in the Sozopol region), mainly by Iraqi and Afghan citizens (Novinite, 2014)**.** The influx of migration in Bulgaria increased the level of crime and corruption in that country. The majority of migrants/refugees continue their journey from Bulgaria to Serbia, Macedonia, or via Romania and Ukraine to Western Europe.

Greece remains an open door to illegal migrants going to other EU countries. After taking stricter and more comprehensive measures along the land borders, a growing trend of transferring migrants/refugees from Turkey to the Greek islands (Samos, Lesbos, Rhodes, Karpathos, Agathonisi, Chios and Mykonos) has been recorded (Frontex, p. 28). The main organizers continue to be Pakistani citizens who liaise with Syrians and citizens of the transit countries in order to smuggle migrants via the Balkans to Western Europe.

Migrant smuggling through the territory of the Republic of Macedonia is carried out in an organized manner, in cooperation with Albanian citizens who have Greek residence. The channels include members of the border control units of the transit countries. In Macedonia, migrants usually enter Serbia via Lojane (near Kumanovo) and then transit to Croatia, Hungary, and other EU member states (Frontex, p. 28). Critical entrance points for migrants to Macedonia remain the villages Stojakovo, Bogorodica, Selemli, close to the village Vasilica at the border with Greece, as well as Kriva Palanka and Strumica near the border with Bulgaria. The vast majority are made up of Syrian, Iraqi and Afghanistani refugees, followed by migrants from Pakistan, Somalia, Algeria, Mali, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Nigeria. In Macedonia, the migrants are transported by Macedonian citizens that have a partial role in the channel for the sum of 50 EUR per person (Frontex, p. 28). Depending on the organization, some of the migrants choose to cross the border with Serbia by train hiding in the freight wagons. At times, as a means of transport, the migrants use the regular international coach lines which operate between Gevgelija-Skopje and EU member state countries. Similarly, an attempt to exit Macedonia has been registered at Alexander the Great airport. The attempt was made by Syrian migrants who had forged Greek identity cards which they procured in Greece for the price of €1000 each. There are records of

transporting migrants from Macedonia and other countries to Albania (via the border crossing at Stenje) and then they move on to Italy and Montenegro, only to continue to EU countries, mostly to Germany (MOI, 2015). According to MOI, on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, just in the period between January and September 2014, 500 migrants from Africa and Asia were detected in the Povardarie region controlled by the Regional border canter "Jug", part of the MOI in Kavadarci. They were found on trains, trucks, or moving on foot or in small groups in taxis from Gevgelija-Veles-Kumanovo, and in the opposite direction from Serbia to Greece. During this period, 19 criminal charges were made for this criminal offence. Among those who transported the migrants there were former police officers (Web Ohrid, 2014). Out of those migrants charged for smuggling, only eight are foreign citizens: two from Bulgaria and Romania, and one from Pakistan, Sudan, Germany, and Kosovo respectively, while the remaining were Macedonian citizens. For the purpose of tracing migrants in the Povardarie region, mobile units from the Customs Administration of the Republic of Macedonia were also included. According to MOI, a police officer employed at the border crossing at Bogorodica, in abuse of his power, provided for the safe smuggling of migrants in an organized manner via illegal crossings for migrants seeking to enter into Macedonia from Greece. For the needs of the criminal group, he also spied out the land and established a 'safe time and place' where in coordination with the rest of the criminal group, they took over and transported the migrants further on (Nova TV, 2014).

For the foreseeable future, one can expect an increased influx of migrants that will seek to enter into the Republic of Macedonia from Greece. This statement stems from the fact that since October 2014, approximately 250,000 Syrian migrants have left Turkey on their way to Greece (Frontex, 2014). Likewise, presently on several locations in Greece, in the vicinity of the border with Macedonia, there have been significant numbers of migrants, including those who have already been caught in Macedonia and deported to Greece, who are awaiting an opportunity for illegal entry. The Greek border authorities that are aware of their location and movement have not intervened with any measures or actions.

Recently, Serbia has been faced with increasing numbers of migrants who mainly enter the country from Bulgaria, but there are some who come from Macedonia too. According to the official data of the Serbian border authorities, 110 immigrants were caught in Serbia during the first quarter. The majority transiting through this country were seen near Nish (Frontex, p. 28). Migrants enter Serbia from Macedonia near the village of Lojane (on the Macedonian

side) and Preshevo (on the Serbian side). One part continues to the north, via Vojvodina to Hungary and Central Europe, and another part to the west, via Croatia to Western Europe. The largest number of migrants in this country comes from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, and Sudan. A variety of vehicles are used as a means of transport to the desired destination: passenger vehicles, vans, trucks, even train freight wagons.

Most of the migrants that enter Albania come from Greece. In other words, the migrants make their way to the EU via Albania, from where one part continues on to Kosovo, then through either Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia, and the other via Montenegro to Italy. The most frequently used exit from Albania to Montenegro is a place called 'the Pomegranate Valley' close to the Hani i Hotit border crossing (Frontex, p. 28). The means of transport usually used by migrants is either in vans, lorries or coaches, but cases have been recorded of migrants being transported by tourist agencies (MOI, 2010). The majority of migrants who wish to travel abroad as 'tourists' come from the northern part of Albania (Kukës, Shkodër, Has, and Puk), and their final destination is Germany. There are also records of Albanian police officers being involved in the transport of immigrants coming from Eritrea, Somalia, and Senegal.

Montenegro is also pressured by migrants seeking to enter the country through Albania and Kosovo (Frontex, p. 28). Recently it has been recorded that the majority of migrants coming into Montenegro are of Kurdish origin and are being smuggled by Turkish citizens. There are three transit routes used by Kurds in Montenegro. The first one is by plane from Istanbul to Podgorica, from where they continue the journey in passenger vehicles to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, with Italy as their final destination. The second route is by plane from Istanbul to Tirana or by coach from Istanbul to Albania via Macedonia, and then in vehicles to Montenegro via Ulcinj, only to continue on to Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy. The third route is by land, from Albania via Montenegro to Serbia (via Belgrade or Subotica-Vojvodina), then on to Hungary and Austria (Frontex, p. 28).

The transport of migrants who did not have any identification documents was recorded in 2014, close to Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along the river Neretva.

Croatia continues to serve as a transit destination to migrants who mainly seek to enter the country from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, and carry on to Slovenia so as to reach Hungary, or Italy. The majority come from Afghanistan and Syria, but there are also records of

migrants coming from Ghana, Mali, Bangladesh and Nigeria. In Croatia, migrants are mostly found on freight trains.

The price for migrant smuggling varies depending on the destination. Namely, the journey of one migrant from Turkey to Greece costs between €500 and €1000 EUR; the price for the journey from Turkey via Bulgaria (Sozopol) to Romania by sea, ranges from between €2500 and €6000; the journey from Greece via Italy to Spain and Great Britain costs from between €4000 and €5000, and the transport of Kurds via Turkey to EU countries costs from €3500 and €4000 EUR (Frontex, p. 32).

The legal basis for police cooperation in the Balkans, to combat this asymmetrical threat, is codified in the Police Cooperation Convention in South-East Europe (PCC SEE), signed in 2006 and ratified in 2007, enabling the exchange of information, joint threat analysis, hot pursuits, joint investigation teams, and mixed patrols along the state border. (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 2007). Article 8 of the Convention gives special attention to regular information exchange to combat illegal migration, envisaging the exchange of information regarding migratory movements, routes, means of transport, forms of organization and smugglers.

In line with the Convention, Macedonia signed protocol agreements for joint patrols with almost all of its neighbours. This included: Bulgaria on 21 February 2011; Albania on 22 February 2008; Serbia on 28 February 2011; and Kosovo on 1 April 2011; as well as protocols and agreements for joint contact centres with the same countries. The European Commission notes that: "border controls have not been effective in detecting irregular migration into the country from Greece and onward transit from the country towards Serbia" (European Commission, 2013). In addition to this, the southern neighbour Greece is excluded from this cooperation. Greece is already an EU member state which applies different procedures in applying for joint projects compared to those where non-EU states apply for EU grants. The different origins of funds for promoting and maintaining agreements on police cooperation can also represent a weakness (Scarabelli, 2012). A feasibility study provided by the International Organization for Migration highlights that an insufficient sharing and exchange of information between countries in the region: "hinders the ability of competent bodies to manage the influx of irregular migration flows in a systematic manner" (IOM, 2013, p. 7). Macedonia has been present in all regional and international initiatives and regularly takes part in ongoing activities. However, most of these activities are meetings at the highest level (ministerial or senior management), which do not allow for substantial

cooperation at the operational and tactical levels. There is a necessity, therefore, for additional initiatives that would enable closer cooperation among police officers at all levels (Lembovska, 2013).

The EU's Treatment of Illegal Migration

The incumbent Greek Presidency of the Council of the EU, which lasted until 1 July 2014 and the successive Italian one, had illegal migration into the EU as the main focus of their political agenda. However, we must immediately point out that, when addressing refugee politics, each country within the EU takes its own course of action. Dimitris Avramopoulos, the EU commissioner for migration and home affairs, in his speech in the European Parliament, called for: 'decisive and coordinated EU-wide actions' to tackle the new ways of smuggling. On the other side, with regards to impeding the movement of refugees coming from the south of the Mediterranean, the European People's Party (EPP) parliamentary group called the EU in the European Parliament to get involved in Libya as a key north-African country. EPP suggested that alongside international partners, Brussels should help establish more functional state structures in this country. As far as Turkey is concerned, the Union has a partner awaiting membership status in the EU, and for this reason Turkey must be ready to cooperate.

It should be emphasized that there is no comprehensive and coordinated European policy concerning refugees, and that the so-called 'Dublin system' has failed, according to which refugees are required to stay in the EU country they have first reached. The aim of the Regulation is to the ensure that one Member State is responsible for the examination of an asylum application, to deter multiple asylum claims and to determine as quickly as possible the responsible Member State to ensure effective access to an asylum procedure. Apart from this, Italy uses its own ways to minimize refugee numbers by simply allowing them to travel north, for example to Germany. The border controls in the countries from the Schengen zone, which make up for most of the EU member states, no longer exist. Although the requests for the EU to redistribute refugees across member states according to population numbers and economic wealth are getting louder, still, there is no consensus on that matter so far (Haselbah, 2015).

According to European Commission data, in 2014, more than 276, 000 people entered the EU illegally, which was an increase of nearly 140% compared to 2013. In other words, it is estimated that in the European Union, home to 500

million residents, there are between 2 to 4 million people residing illegally. Due to the inconsistent approach in the implementation of policies by the institutions, EU member states are facing problems with deflecting the migration wave (Rieger and Trajkovska, 2014).

A network of 560 NGOs from around the world, known under the abbreviation UNITED, is accusing the EU and its institutions of announcing false information regarding the migrants from Africa, Asia and the Near East who have died on their way to the EU (Seiffert, 2104). They have come to this conclusion by comparing official data of the European institutions to information gathered and analysed from print and electronic media. On the other hand, the EU does not acknowledge this, but tries to spin it as a confirmation of the continuity of its policy for the intensified protection of migrants. The EU's activities were directed towards negotiations with countries with the largest number of migrants (especially Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Eritrea) in order to disrupt criminal networks in the countries behind the organized transportation of migrants.

The inconsistency of EU policies with regards to tackling the migrant issue is evident, on the one hand, in the constant equipping of Frontex with the latest surveillance systems, and the increasing tendency to create a 'Fortress Europe', and on the other hand, in its intention to help migrants and refugees to find shelter in some of the EU countries (Taube, 2013). In spite of this, the situation in the EU countries that first confront the wave of migrants is especially indicative and disturbing.

For decades, Italy has been facing an increased flow of illegal migrants from North Africa and, since the outburst of the civil war in Syria – an increased migration from this country as well. The number of refugees in Italy has greatly exceeded the capacity of the refugee reception centers and they have been more and more frequently expressing their discontent with the overcrowded situation by organizing protests. At the beginning of 2014, the number of migrants trying to reach Italy by sea was ten times as high as their number in the same period the year before (Utrinski vesnik, 2014). This alarming situation led to an enlarged patrol along Italy's maritime border with Libya and Tunis, which accounts for the major part of the migration to Italy. However, the number of migrants from other countries, such as Syria, Eritrea, Somalia, Egypt, Nigeria, Zambia, Mali, and Pakistan, has also increased. A direct route runs from Ethiopia to Sicily and Calabria. From Egypt there are two routes. The first one runs to Crete where it forks – one way leading to the coast of Italy and the other to Turkey and then to the EU. The second route runs to Malta. The islands of

Lumpedusa and Sicily are still used by migrants as their first stop on Italian territory (Rieger and Nedevski, 2014). For transport they mostly use small boats and rubber rafts. The latest smuggling trend of criminal gangs is to buy old boats and load them with hundreds of refugees after previously charging them several thousands of euros. On the way, the captain would leave the boat setting the autopilot to head for Italy (Rieger and Trajkovska, 2014).

During 2013, many Afghans and Pakistanis interviewed at the asylum registration center (CARA) in Crotone (southern Italy) suggested that they had used the longer land route through the Western Balkan countries when travelling from Greece to Italy instead of a much shorter maritime passage (Frontex, 32).

As mentioned before, Greece serves as a gateway for a great number of migrants from North Africa who travel through the Balkans to reach the countries in the EU. The greater part of these migrants comes by sea from Turkey, mostly from its western region - Dalaman. The growth of illegal migration by sea is due to the enhanced controls along the land border between Greece and Turkey. However, this could also be attributed to the Turkish government's decision for visa liberalization with most Arabian countries (Michaletos, 2014). On their maritime route to Greece, migrants typically use improvised rafts and old fishing boats that often sink, preventing many from reaching their desired destination.

The specific geographic location makes Bulgaria an important destination and a transit smuggling station for many migrants who, due to the still complex political and security situation, come mostly from Syria. During the previous year, 2014, the number of illegal migrants trying to cross the Turkey-Bulgaria border reached 38,500. According to the records of the State Refugee Agency (SAR), tens thousands of these refugees had applied for asylum. Most of the refugees came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Bulgaria's Vice Prime Minister Meglena Kuneva, who is responsible for this issue, said that compared to 2013 the number of refugees was 200 percent higher. Kuneva also said that she was expecting an even greater refugee wave since the war was still raging in Syria and Iraq and since the crimes of the Islamic states had forced many to go into exile. . Neighboring Turkey is estimated to be the "home" of two million refugees, most of whom are waiting for the spring and for better weather conditions to attempt entering the EU (Papakochev, 2015). In 2013, the European Commission granted Bulgaria 6 million euros to improve the disastrous living standards in their refugee camps. Meanwhile, Sofia is making efforts to protect their southern border against the refugee inflow expected this

spring. After putting up a 33-km fence last year, the Bulgarian government is now investing around 46 million euros for continuing the fencing by an additional 83 kilometers (Bedrov, 2014). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR and many non-governmental organizations condemned Bulgaria's actions. Namely, in order to fully secure its border with Turkey, the Bulgarian Ministry of Internal Affairs has posted an additional 1,400 border police officers in the areas with no fencing or border crossings, which has consequently pushed them to their financial limits. As a result, their Minister of Internal Affairs, Veselin Vucko, demanded military units to be deployed along the border (Papakochev, 2015).

The Latvian Presidency of the EU Council is expected to focus on the issue of refugee and migration policy. This new policy is to be aimed at supporting Germany's initiative for revising the Dublin regulation. Contrary to this practice, the EU should introduce quotas in order to justly distribute refugees on its territory and unburden its frontier countries. The German Minister of Internal Affairs Thomas de Maiziere points out that the increased illegal migration has brought profit only to the criminal gangs. In only a year, smugglers across the Mediterranean Sea have made four to five billion euros (Riegert and Trajkovska, 2014). For years now, the EU countries have been debating about what measures need to be taken. The main dilemma remains how to distribute migrants. In the meantime, the Dublin III Regulation is still operational. It makes the EU country in which refugees have first set foot responsible for hosting them and instigating a regular procedure. The countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, such as Italy and Greece, have reasonably deemed themselves as overburdened. Five other countries, among them Germany, indicate that both in total and estimated per head of citizens, they host the largest refugee population.

The EU divides migrants into two categories: contingent refugees, mostly coming from Syria at the moment, who have been authorized by the UNHCR and sent to the EU, and asylum-seekers, who have reached the EU by legal or illegal means. EU-member countries have accepted to temporarily receive about 30,000 contingent refugees from Syria, which have been unevenly distributed among them. East-European countries receive almost no refugees. Southern countries, such as Portugal and Spain, are also hesitant. By contrast, Turkey has received about a million refugees from neighboring Syria (Riegert and Trajkovska, 2014). This is why the European Commission intends to introduce a system for the fair distribution of refugees, which would take into account the countries' population and their economic strength, announced the

competent EU Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos. Minister de Maiziere indicates that a double or triple growth of the number of refugees in Germany would be unacceptable. As some of his EU colleagues, de Maiziere proposes formation of refugee centers in North Africa, where the reception procedure would start.

At the same time, the countries that are most affected by illegal migration have been taking concrete actions to tackle the illegal inflow. In November 2014, the European Agency for the Management of External Borders (Frontex) launched a new maritime operation called Triton near the Italian coastline, which focused on border surveillance. Effective surveillance is probably the best tool to counter this method as clearly shown by footage from the Albanian border with Montenegro. In one case alone, images of SMARTDEC cameras installed at the green border (railway) with Montenegro enabled Albanian Border Police to detect four migrants who were attempting an illegal border-crossing (Frontex, p. 27). Parallel with Triton, Italy is conducting an independent rescue mission in international waters named Mare Nostrum (Rieger and Nedevski, 2014).

Conclusion

The increased inflow of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and illegal migrants from North Africa still remains one of the key problems both for the EU and the transit countries that are not EU members. There are plans to take security measures for blocking the maritime routes used by many migrants from conflict-affected regions, but as a consequence smuggling routes by land passing through the Balkans and Western Europe are expected to intensify. In addition, the increased number of migrants is expected to boost the level of crime and corruption in the region due to the involvement of the local criminal networks. The Balkans is still used as a transit destination by numerous migrants heading towards the EU, but some of them stay and seek asylum in the countries from the region, which could have a negative socioeconomic and security implications. Syria apart, increased refugees could be growing from Iraq and Afghanistan, where the security situation has seriously deteriorated. The number of migrants from Eritrea, Algeria, and other African countries has also grown. In the last three months, much attention has been given to the surge of interest among citizens from the Balkans (Albania, Serbia, Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia) to illegally reach an EU-member country, primarily Germany. The majority of the immigrants travel through the Western Balkans

and head towards Croatia and Hungary in order to get to Western or Central Europe. A massive inflow of more migrants into Europe will create destabilizing political effects in most countries along with serious economic, social and health concerns. Moreover a chain reaction effect of illegal migration, will lay the foundations of the continuation of a decade's long procedure that will impact on stability in both the Balkans and the rest of Europe and exacerbate simmering ethnic tensions.

To prevent all possible threats that could occur, the following measures should be taken by all European countries: more investment in human and technical resources; an increase in collaboration and joint operations between the neighboring countries affected; diplomatic unity in the face of the issue and vis-à-vis Turkey which stands as the main transit conduit of incoming migration flows; the seeking out of more EU-funded structures relating to the issue; the use of long-range investigations to take out criminal syndicates involved in human smuggling, forged paper production and illegal migration assistance.

To conclude, the fight against illegal migration should not rest solely on the shoulders of the gateway, transit and final destination countries. Instead, it should be driven by a comprehensive strategy because all countries in continental Europe are affected by the problem. As mentioned, the consequences of illegal migration are felt in North Europe as much as they are in the south. For this reason, we believe that an integrated strategy cannot be implemented without the political EU integration of all the countries from continental Europe, primarily speaking of the Western Balkans countries that have been unjustly excluded from the EU integration process.

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