

## The Balkans and the Black Sea

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### Changes in the Balkan illegal migration route. Toward a resumption of the flows?

Numerous signals point out how that the Balkan route is not entirely closed and that its potential role of illegal access to Europe is still relevant. Due to the geopolitical position of the region, it flows to Europe irregular migrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. A key role in controlling this corridor is played by Turkey, which is partially capable of fine-tuning these flows with a liberal policy towards migrants and refugees coming from Muslim countries and a laissez faire approach toward their smuggling out of the country. This produces a net strategic return for Ankara.

The main axis of the Balkan route follows the corridor X, the Thessaloniki-Skopje-Belgrade route, crossing from Greece to Macedonia and Serbia. From Belgrade, there are two options for the flow to reach continental Europe: to Hungary, via Roskea crossing, or to Croatia, via Bajakovo crossing. Both routes inevitably end up in Austria, partially a target country and partially the last transit country before continuing to Germany. The crossing Slovenia may, however, also imply an alternative secondary route to Italy. This land route through the Balkans starts often with a maritime crossing through the Aegean route, nowadays the main way for irregular migrants to exit Turkey.



### The capacity of the Balkan route and the different role of the transit states

In the period 2015 - 2016, the Western Balkans route has demonstrated its ability to destabilize the countries of the region and those of the European Union. The peak of the crisis was evident in September 2015 when the flow of migrants leaving Turkey became impressive approaching 1 million persons and reaching the heart of Europe and Germany in a very short time. This happened due to the decision of the governments of the transit country not to oppose the flow but to facilitate it transporting the migrants towards Central Europe.

Using this corridor, more than 800,000 migrants have reached Germany between July 2014 and March 2016. The Balkan route, compared to other routes, is characterized by the presence of a chain of states with many borders, weak economies, scarcely populated and that objectively with have little or no ability to control or manage massive migratory waves. The population of Macedonia, for example, the first country of the Balkan route after Greece, is only twice the magnitude of the migration flow that has crossed it, with obvious implications in terms of economic and security sustainability in the event that migrants would enter the country without leaving it (as it would happen in the case, for example, Serbia's will close its border).

The Balkan route presents a specific paradox; the irregular migrants are entering from a EU candidate country (Turkey), to a Schengen country (Greece) in violation or suspension of Dublin agreement and then exiting the Schengen area and continuing through non-European countries (Macedonia and Serbia) before re-entering the free movement area in Hungary or Croatia.

The fact that the refugees flow from Greece and then the Balkan route and don't follow the most direct land route through Bulgaria is the consequence of some factors that deserve a reflection. First, Bulgaria has stepped up its border with Turkey and the construction of a long barrier, while Greece has made the same on its land border but is unable to do a similar thing along its maritime border. The construction of a barrier at the Bulgarian-Turkish border hinders the flow out of Turkey by diverting it to Greece, and hence along the Macedonian-Serb route. A similar situation is happening in the North, thanks to the construction of barriers of protection between Hungary and Serbia, which channel illegal migration flows to the North West. A first finding is therefore that there are countries that, that helped by geography and a rigid border policy are able to remain relatively out of the flow. This often implies the mobilization of the armed forces in support of the police forces for the construction of border barriers and for their control. Bulgaria and Hungary are two of these states. A second category of states is represented by countries such as Greece, Macedonia and Serbia which, due to their geographical position or other difficulties (capacity, will, resources), were unable or unwilling during the crisis to exercise control of their own borders.

These states, more directly and massively exposed to the migration pressure have been forced by the magnitude of the crisis to adopt an approach of controlled transit of the irregular migrations, favoring their exit from the northern boundaries. The transit states decided to substitute the irregular private system of transports – often handled by the organized crime - (taxi, van, coaches, fishing boats, yachts, private vehicles), to offer migrants a state transport connection for crossing the country. This is evident in the case of the first ring of the Balkan route chain, the transport of migrants from the Greek islands to the mainland, almost exclusively by public transport as well as the special trains organized in the mainland.

This season it appears to be over, mostly because of the changes of the political line in Germany and the fact that now borders (such as between Macedonia and Greece or that between Serbia and Macedonia) have been hardened to cope with future migration crises. It is therefore probable that a new migratory crisis of the same magnitude as that of 2015-2016 would not necessarily be carried out in the same way and the along the same routes.

Many elements have changed the functioning and reaction mechanisms of the states of the region if a new migration crisis involving hundreds of thousands of people in a short time will occur.

### **Austria's position and the unilateral migration policies of many EU countries**

Austria can be regarded as a strategic transit country because it channels illegal immigrants both from the central Mediterranean route, via Italy, and from the Balkan route, via Slovenia and Hungary. Up to now, the Austrian flow has been predominantly dominated by Asian and Middle East nationalities, such as Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians, but because of its strategic position it is liable to act as a gateway to Europe for good part of the countries of Africa.

It should not be forgotten that the route from the Horn of Africa, the one practiced by Somalis, Eritreans, and Ethiopians, which is currently heading to Libya, could also fuel the Balkan route through the Eastern Mediterranean when it does not have the possibility to venture through Libya and the route of the Central Mediterranean. Direct flight connections between main Western Africa capitals with Istanbul could geographically increment the source of Western African migrants in the Balkan route.

Because of the links of Austria with the Balkan Peninsula and through it to the Eastern Mediterranean, Austria it is the country most exposed to migratory flows from a large geopolitical area. It is also the gateway to Germany, one of the main European economies targeting migratory flows. For these reasons, in January 2016, Austria has adopted a policy of limiting the flows of the number of refugees' applications setting a maximum of 1.5% of their population. This amounts to slightly less than 40,000 people, less than half of the nearly one hundred thousand who illegally crossed the country in 2015. In February 2016, the Austrian Interior Minister also announced a maximum number of migrants who can pass through the country on a daily basis (little more than 3,000). The consequence of Austria's shift in policy – directly connected with the abandonment of the *Wir-schaffen-das* policy by the German government - has pushed all the Balkan countries to adopt restrictive countermeasures to halt the flow if they will re-emerge in the same magnitude. Slovenia has prohibited migrants from crossing their territory and Macedonia has announced the closure of the border with Greece by providing containment measures along the 300-kilometer border. Serbia has also set some measures on the border with Macedonia. One aspect of the Balkan migrant crisis is the completely non-strategic and chaotic way how the crisis was handled at political level: is a paradoxical situation on how European countries have each pursued their own autonomous strategy and have clearly adopted a double standard for the migration crisis: in the first stage trying to avoid closing borders in neighboring European countries, pushing them to handle the flow according to rules of Dublin and criticizing on humanitarian grounds their restrictive measures; but soon after they adopted restrictive internal policies and border control in order to reduce the flows diverting it towards neighboring countries. This double track tactic - restricting its access and facilitating transit along alternative corridors - appears to be a short-term emergency measure that cannot be sustained in the long term, otherwise will imply the risk of endangering the whole European project. In fact, it contrasts so much with the principle of solidarity between the states of the European Union and with the overall logic of reducing flows in the European area as, in the long term, freedom of movement in the Schengen area will lead to a re- distribution of illegal inputs across the European territory. In turn, this will lead to the crisis in the political relations between the member states, which has been repeatedly evident in the growing tensions in the last months between Italy and Austria, with real and announced forms of restoration of border controls at the Brenner, even with the use of the Armed Forces. In addition to this, Austria has initiated forms of covert control of the borders by its own police and military forces without formally deploying visible new forces along its borders.

It is not surprising, in this context of growing unilateralism in the migration policies of the various EU countries, to witness the extensive instrumental recourse by some European states to NGO acting as strategic proxy in order to divert potential flows to other routes, especially the central Mediterranean. Several elements to sustain this theory can be found in the Final Report of the Senate Defense Commission's Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on illegal migration.

### **New trafficking routes across South Eastern Europe toward the EU?**

Migrants and traffickers for more than a year have been trying to find new routes in South Eastern Europe to get around the blocks and barriers introduced by Austria and other countries along the Balkan route, such as in Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Macedonia. In the last year there have been two important aspects to handle: the future of the thousands of migrants trapped in this route

from the 2015-2016 crisis, particularly in Greece and Serbia, who are trying to abandon these countries on their way to the European Union; the attempt of the organized crime to open new entry channels by circumventing the barriers erected in the last two years, breaking new ways in and out from the Balkans to the stock of migrants who are continuing to flow to Turkey from Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

A new development of the last months are the attempts to open a new route through the Black Sea, which starts from the Turkish coast and lands in Romania, where the Romanian Coast Guard intercepted several vessels loaded with hundreds of migrants, predominantly from Syria, Iraq and Iran. For the time being, given the limited number of people using the Black Sea route, this phenomenon does not appear to be of particular concern of Frontex and of the Romanian border guards. For the moment, the Romanian authority do not consider possible a surge in the numbers of sea arrivals and it does not seem likely to adopt a line of entry denials or criminalization of landings.

However, the data of landings on Romanian shores in August and September, which exceeded 500 units, are already higher than those of the whole 2014, the year in which a record in the landing was recorded with 430 people arriving via Black Sea in Romania and Bulgaria. The fact that Romania is a country outside the Schengen area, and hence less attractive for migrants, may appear to be a deterrent. But is also an element that may induce the Romanian authorities not to take the possible crisis seriously and without taking the due preparation in order to face a possible crisis. If the magnitude will be of thousands of people per months the internal border control and reception system will hardly be able to confront it. Considering also the fact that Romania is not an attractive destination country for the flows, we can assume that in the event of a significant increase in the illegal arrivals Romania could react adopting a response policy similar to that of Greece, negotiating a controlled passage of the arrived migrants to Hungary or Croatia, but it is not foreseeable to imagine how these countries will react.

Finally, an important lesson learned from the migration crisis in the Balkan route may be highlighted. The inability of Europe to contain the migratory crisis in the Mediterranean and in the Balkan at the same time implies that the single target countries on the Mediterranean peninsulas (Spain, Italy and Greece/Balkans) will compete in diverting the flows if the European Union will not decide to adopt a common CSDP foreign policy action in Sub-Saharan Africa, securing the borders with Niger, Chad and Sudan. The UE should adopt a common operative strategy against human smuggling and trafficking that will avoid that a closure of the Central or Eastern Mediterranean route will imply the re-opening of the other.

The summary of the above is that the routes cannot be considered individually or separately, but must be considered in their type, identifying those smuggling and traffic choke points that are located along some routes of the Sahel or that are represented by some key transit countries.

On these steps, the action of the European Union should be joint, preventive and, above all, constant. Actually, acting on the single access routes in Europe implies having to face a phenomenon characterized by intermittence and by many access options to the European space.