

# Migrant Crisis, a Security Challenge for the Republic of Macedonia

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## Abstract

The migrant crisis is an imposed problem that requires a thorough solution. The complete understanding of the reasons for migration, as well as the situation in the Mediterranean basin and in the Middle East is a precondition for finding appropriate solutions. Eradication of poverty and disparity, the fight against terrorism and the ISIS extremism as well as the fight against other similar groups are just a fraction of the necessary preconditions for a successful dealing with the current challenges. The solution to the drama with the infinite wave of migrants from Syria and the Middle East, to which we are sad observers, seems is not to be seen soon<sup>1</sup>. First of all, if we look at the European political elite and the general lack of a reliable and clear strategy for solving this problem, all we will see is helplessness and mutual accusations. The migrant or the refugee crisis is followed by a large number of incidents or series of events. The massive arrival of refugees in the European Union, usually illegal migrants from Asia, Africa and parts of Southeastern Europe, started in the mid of 2010 and escalated in 2015. The reasons for the mass arrival are traditionally associated with the chronic unemployment and poverty in these countries, but lately, are also result of the war, especially in Syria, where the civil war caused massive exodus of the population. The situation is similar in Libya, where the fall of Moamer Gaddafi's regime led to anarchy, used by the well-organized networks of human traffickers.

By mid-2015, the refugee crisis mainly took place on the Mediterranean coast of Italy, where refugees were arriving by ships and boats. In many cases, such attempts were futile and led to mass deaths. Lately, there has been a massive influx of refugees and migrants in the Balkans, using Greece and Croatia, EU member countries on the periphery of the Union, as entry point. But also, The Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia, candidate countries for the EU, are not bypassed. Although the European political establishment met the refugees with sympathy and as victims of the horrors of war that EU needs to provide shelter for, in time, the attitude toward the refugees became subject to fierce criticism by part of the European public. Concerns about the additional burdening of the social services, worsening of the security situation or the possible disappearance of the Christian identity of Europe due to the massive influx of Muslims from war areas in the Middle East arose. Recently, the attitude toward the migrants became the subject of a heated debate - dispute

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vecernji.org/>

between some European countries, especially between Germany, which insists on “open door” policy and Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, which claim that their countries will suffer consequences due to such policy.

The refugee-migrant crisis is a threat in several aspects and already has influence on the economic and social stability as well as internal security in the countries through which the migrants transit or remain, including the Republic of Macedonia. The busiest western – Balkan route used for arrival in the Schengen zone, especially in Germany, Sweden and other western and Nordic countries, brings negative influence visible in the social aspect, genuine threat to the national identity (culture, language, religion) and such endangerment inevitably will lead to an increased incidence of xenophobia, nationalism and racism. At the end, conditions for emergence of social disintegration will be created in the countries through which the migrants transit or remain, including the Republic of Macedonia. The economic stability, being crucial for a social stability, but also, for internal security, will be affected due to the use of additional resources and capacities (accommodation, health, communal services, transport and education) that the affected countries, including the Republic of Macedonia, should provide and set in function due to the newly arisen situation.

**Keywords:** migrants; refugees; challenge; security; stability.

## Introduction

The European migrant or refugee crisis is manifestation of a large number of incidents, or a serial of events connected to the mass arrival of the refugees. Europe is facing big problems in dealing with the hundreds of thousands of refugees who are running from war areas in the Middle East and North Africa, looking for asylum in the European countries. In 2015, the European Union Agency for protection of its borders – FRONTEX registered 1,55 million illegal crossings of the European Union borders.<sup>2</sup>

The migrant crisis is a challenge for whole Europe, especially for the smaller countries on the continent, whose economies are in bad and disastrous condition. There is a genuine risk that such pressure can lead to violent clashes with the migrants, and also, it would represent a sort of a test of the relations between the local Muslim and Christian population in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The massive influx of refugees and migrants in the Balkans, using Greece and Croatia, as EU member countries on the periphery of the Union, did not bypass the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia, candidate countries for the EU. The failure of Greece to fulfill its obligations for securing the borders of the passport free Schengen

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<sup>2</sup> <https://hr.wikipedija.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Ariel Cohen, Dinu Patriciu Euroasia Center – Atlantic Council, 27 January 2016

zone is in a complete disparity with the role of Macedonia in dealing with the influx of hundreds of thousand migrants fleeing the war areas.

According to US Security Experts which recently visited the region, the security on the Greek-Macedonian border is the key for management of the migrant crisis. If not established, the Schengen regime, the great achievement of the EU, faces a suspension. That will have serious consequences for the future of the EU.

More than 750.000 migrants passed through the country in the past year. Macedonia, with modest support from Albania, Slovenia and other neighboring countries, took care of the migrants and organized reception, provided food and medical help. Brussels, Berlin and Washington have to do everything in their power to help countries like Macedonia in facing this challenge.<sup>4</sup>

### **Migrant crisis, influences and possible development of the conditions in the Balkans**

The refugee-migrant crisis is a threat from few aspects and already has influence on the economical and social stability as well as on the internal security of the countries through which the migrants transit or remain, including the Republic of Macedonia. The busiest western – Balkans route used for arrival in the Schengen zone, especially Germany, Sweden and other western and Nordic countries, brings negative influence visible in the social aspect, genuine threat to the national identity (culture, language, religion) and such endangerment inevitably will lead to an increased incidence of xenophobia, nationalism and racism. At the end, conditions for emergence of social disintegration in the countries, through which the migrants transit or remain, will be created.

The economic stability, being crucial for the social stability but also, for the internal security, will be affected due to the use of additional resources and capacities (accommodation, health, communal services, transport and education) that the affected countries, should allocate and set in function due to the newly arisen situation.

The main reason for the current migration to the EU is the pursuit of prosperity, while the main causes are the following:

- disruption of the security and stability in regions in the Middle East and North Africa,
- the existence of double standards in the international world regime,
- disappearance of prospective for a better tomorrow among the young population in the domicile countries,
- the strong soft power of EU (especially Germany, France, Sweden and Great Britain).

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<sup>4</sup> Ariel Cohen, Dinu Patriciu Euroasia Center – Atlantic Council, 27 January 2016

According to the statistics, since the beginning of the wars and instability, around 60 million persons were forced to leave their homes. The refugees and migrants that flee to the EU member countries mainly come from Syria, but also from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan and Eritrea. In reference to Syria, as a country that has produced the highest number of migrants and refugees in the period from 2011 till present, 4 million people have left the country which amounts to one fifth of its population. The reasons for this are the rule of Bashar Al-Assad as well as the brutality of the terrorist organization ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.

The most interesting countries for the refugees are Germany, France and Sweden, mainly due to the developed social care systems. In the first four months of 2015, 242.000 asylum requests were submitted in the EU countries, 80% more than in the same period the year before. The majority of asylum seekers are men between 18 and 34 years of age, but notable is the increase of minors requesting asylum. Syrians and Kosovars represent 40 percent of the total number of asylum seekers in this period.

In terms of how the refugees arrive in the EU countries, the statistics show that around 219.000 persons arrived in Spain and Italy, by crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey. The refugees also move via the western-Balkan countries (Greece, Macedonia and Serbia). According to the data from the International Office of Migration, during 2014, around 3.200 persons lost their lives in the Mediterranean waters, while in the first half of 2015 that number was 2.500 persons. The winter period will bring increased number of deaths due to the deteriorating conditions for sailing in the Aegean Sea.

Although, seemingly, the migration started spontaneously, it can be concluded that we are talking about a planned and organized transport via the western – Balkan route, including the Republic of Macedonia. The following facts confirm the above:

- telephone guidance (leading) during border crossing,
- multiple appearance of the same persons in charge of the migrants in the trains transporting the migrants on the route Gevgelija – Tabanovce and vice versa,
- marking of crossing paths (plastic bottles and textile),
- the existence of locations in Greece where the migrants pay for false IDs and locations for sale of fake travel documents,
- offering bribery to the members of ARM and the MOI for faster and easier transit through Macedonia,
- there are unconfirmed information that the transport is funded and the funds are obtained at several locations in Turkey and Serbia.

Greece, being the first EU country, directs the refugees and migrants exclusively towards Macedonia, with precise instructions on how to proceed to one of the EU countries. At the beginning of the crisis, 2 to 3 thousand refugees per day were arriving i.e. were brought to the south border of Macedonia. That number is higher now. The

average of foreign citizens who are taken and are allowed to pass at border stone 59 is around 4000 persons daily, which totals to 120 thousand per month. Beside the transport of the migrants to Macedonia, Greece is additionally cleaning its territory from the illegal migrants who reside there for a longer period.

In addition to having a wire fence on the border with Turkey, Bulgaria has introduced additional measures by sending Army Forces to help the Border Police, all with aim to establish a better control of the border line. According to the information, from one hand, the authorities in Sofia were optimistic that the refugee crisis will not be directed toward Bulgaria due to the lack of free transit corridor and the well secured borders, as well as the constant checkups in the country. On the other hand, in advance, they rhetorically prepare the ground and warn about the difficulties they face in order for the EU to help them. They also make efforts to dissuade the refugees through different propaganda programs.

Serbia is trying to present itself as the most humane country in the region and in a large measure has succeeded. The success can be seen from the support among the migrants, but also from the western countries media, who criticize the authorities in Serbia the least in the way they are handling the crisis. In support to the Serbian success is also the "failures of the neighbors" presented in the Serbian media and in part of the western media. Peace and order is primarily maintained in Preshevo and Kaljizha camps, as well as the rhythm in transporting of the migrants, while their registration and finding out the identity is a secondary task. The Serbian authorities have unofficially calculated that in the last six months, around 400 thousand persons have transited through their country.

The situation in Croatia escalated after 15<sup>th</sup> of September, after Hungary closed the border with Serbia. The Croatian police clashed with big groups of migrants that were prevented from entering the newly opened shelter for registration of refugees asking for asylum in Europe. The refugees and migrants arrive in Croatia from Serbia with organized bus transport and as a protection measure from the big wave of migrants, Croatia closed the Batrovci border crossing thus creating additional tensions and countermeasures between Serbia and Croatia. Also, besides on interstate level, in Croatia, visible were the attempts to use the migrant crisis on internal plan, for gaining political points, making the disagreements on how to overcome the crisis between the Supreme Commander and the Prime Minister of Croatia more visible.

Hungary has shown the least understanding for the migrant crisis, demonstrated by building the protection wire wall on the border with Serbia and adopting the law stating that every individual who would damage the fence or try to illegally enter the country would be punished with 3 years imprisonment. Hungary tried to close all rail connections with Germany. First more serious control of the refugees is done in Hungary, where the refugees are obliged to get documents stating their identity

and have their fingerprints taken in order to be able to continue on their way. The Hungarian authorities announced that since the beginning of the migrant crisis, over half of a million refugees have entered Hungary and continued to Austria and Germany.

Austria's attitude toward the refugees got tensed by introducing checkups on the borders, which is against the European idea for open borders. Still, the Austrian authorities call this act "act of humanitarian organization", i.e. a measure for prevention of undesirable accidents. There is confirmed information that impatience toward the migrants is growing in Austria which will lead to strengthening of the right sector.

Germany, as a desired destination, is a country that has suspended the Dublin declaration and approved submitting of asylum requests. Germany is facing demographic deficit which leads to fall of the productivity and weakening of the economy. At the moment, the category of migrants with high education is useful to Germany. Germany is accomplishing strategic goals through the migrant crisis:

- enlargement of the economic capacity of the country and total economical domination over the continent in the long run,
- demonstration of the political power to the rest of the European countries by not undertaking appropriate measures.

Still, not long ago, Germany, Austria, Holland and Slovakia introduced border checkups, mainly because of the big wave of migrants, which is contrary to the Schengen Agreement.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to the Republic of Macedonia and the first wave of migrants, currently, these are persons in a better financial situation, mostly young people with finished high school or university. Indicative is the ratio between men and women, 3:1, or 4:1 in favor of men.

### **Migrant crisis, influences on the situation in the Republic of Macedonia**

Macedonia is a member state of the Convention from 1951 and its Protocol from 1967. The Law on asylum and temporary protection adopted in 2003 incorporates the provisions of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol in a national law, including the definition of a refugee, termination provisions, exclusion provisions and the principles of non-*refoulement*.<sup>6</sup> The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol remain the basis of the international regime for protection and are to be followed completely when "subsidiary" and "complementary" forms of protection are applied. Beside the general principals of the international law on refugees, in light of the current status of the Republic of Macedonia as aspirant country for membership in the European

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<sup>5</sup> [www.telegraf.mk](http://www.telegraf.mk)

<sup>6</sup> Article 33 from the Refugee Convention from 1951: No Contracting State shall expel or return (*'refouler'*) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Union and its efforts for incorporation of the European legislative instruments in the national legislation, appropriate is the reference to the legislative framework and general principles that embody EU *acquis* for asylum. The numbers show that over 6 500 000 persons are registered as displaced i.e. refugees, with final destination the countries of Western Europe. The interviewed Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan indicated the sexual violence as one of the main reasons for leaving Syria.

Republic of Macedonia is on the refugees' route from Syria via Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece to the western European countries. Some of the migrant use Macedonia only as a transit route on their way to the European countries. But the number of those that decide to stay and ask for asylum in Macedonia is getting bigger. Besides the undoubted destituteness, abandonment and misfortune of the Syrian refugees, if we go back to the moment when the Huns arrived in Europe, the question about the consequences of the refugee wave from Syria arises. To start with, the problem with the refugees would represent additional burden to the economy of our country. Next, it would cause general unpleasantness in the society, thus creating a moment of a growing xenophobia. The growing tensions would also include the fear from crime. The thefts of food, clothing and other necessary living products could not be avoided. In such times one cannot exclude the organized crime such as human trafficking. If we follow the example of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon who manufacture hashish in order to survive, one would not exclude drug trafficking as well. In Syria, thefts of antiquities in 6 museums have been reported, meaning, there is possibility that these persons possess the same and in a case of need, may start with illegal trade of cultural property.<sup>7</sup>

Looking further into the consequences, we can also add the Syrian epidemic of child paralysis. Child paralysis, also known as Polio, is transmitted with contaminated food or water, and in October, an epidemic amongst the children in Syria was confirmed, after 14 years of eradication. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the disease probably spread from Pakistan, one of the three countries in the world where it is endemic. They also warn that the Syrian epidemics can become a threat for millions of children in the Middle East. The children paralysis is easily transmitted from person to person and is spreading fast among children, especially in unhygienic conditions in which millions live in Syria, a country engaged in war for the past 4 years, as well as in the packed refugee camps in the neighboring countries.

The last 10 years, the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski has undertaken impressive economic reforms and social advance. The "Doing Business" index of the World Bank ranked Macedonia on the 6<sup>th</sup> place in Europe and 12<sup>th</sup> in the world. The education and the social care show significant improvement. Still, the refugee crisis is a threat for the progress and burdens the Macedonian road to EU and NATO<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.utrinski.mk/default.asp?ItemID=0944212C2DD1CA47BFF298BEC6C8E414>

<sup>8</sup> Ariel Cohen, Dinu Patriciu Euroasia Center – Atlantic Council, 27 January 2016

The Government of the Republic of Macedonia believes that it should fulfill the provisions of the Brussels politics, although EU is refusing to give the necessary tools for dealing with the migrant crisis. If this continues, the public opinion on the European integration may change.

### **The contribution of the Republic of Macedonia in solving the challenges of the migrant-refugee crisis**

At the moment, the situation in the Republic of Macedonia is secure and stable. The border crossings with Greece and the Republic of Serbia are open and waiting to cross the border is not longer than the usual. The parts of the border line where transit of illegal migrants has been noticed are under reinforced control of the security forces, enabling optimal and uninterrupted passage, in accordance with the national and international legislative and declarations for protection of the human rights. In coordination with the national Bodies, the Red Cross of the Republic of Macedonia, UNHCR and other numerous organizations, the Republic of Macedonia, in the frame of its capacities, secures humane treatment of the illegal migrants. The reinforced control of the border line with Greece and the Republic of Serbia is result of the decision by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia to declare a crisis situation among these border lines, due to the increased influx of illegal migrants and the need for maintaining the peace and stability on a national basis. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially informed Greece and the Republic of Serbia, as well as the rest of the countries in the world, through its diplomatic-consular offices.

Thus far, the Republic of Macedonia has undertaken a series of steps and measures in solving this global problem. It implemented amendments to the Law on asylum and temporary protection, allowing the migrants to decide if they will apply for asylum or leave the territory of the Republic of Macedonia in a period of 72 hours. It created two temporary protection points in Gevgelija and Tabanovce for helping the migrants. Meanwhile, the vulnerable categories of migrants are temporary accommodated in the Shelter for asylum seekers in Vizbegovo, near Skopje. The possibility for opening a Center for migrants is also being considered. In June, inter-ministerial Body was created, consisting of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defense, Internal Affairs, Local Self-government, Health and Labor and Social Politics. This Body meets regularly, monitors the development of the situation with the migrants and takes appropriate measures. In July, an Action Plan with measures for dealing with the increased influx of refugees was formed. The Macedonian Security Forces are regularly out in the field for providing control and suppression of the groups that carry out illegal activities related to transfer of migrants.

According to the Ministry of Interior data, since the implementation of the amendments to the Law on asylum, 41.414 certificates were issued to foreign citizens. According



to their citizenship, the largest number are from Syria – 33.461, then Afghanistan – 2.073, Irak – 1.947, Pakistan – 1.198, Somalia – 561, Palestine – 560, Congo – 301, Bangladesh – 230, Nigeria – 142, Cameroon – 140, Eritrea – 140, Ethiopia – 109, and others, in smaller number. In the past two months, it is estimated that the daily influx of illegal migrants is over 4.000, unlike at the beginning of the migrant crisis, when the daily influx was around 600. Since the beginning of 2016, this number is relatively decreasing, due to the period of the year which is not convenient for the refugees. The Republic of Macedonia communicates on a regular basis with the international community about the continuous increase in the number of illegal migrants on its territory, stressing the need for help in improvement of the limited capacities for dealing with the migrant influx and improving the collaboration with the other countries in the area of border politics and border control. We are also in communication with our neighbors and the EU and UN, since this is a problem where Macedonia is just one of the destinations and part of the migrant route. We are searching for a solution to deal with the highly increased influx.

## Conclusion

The migrant crisis represents a trigger which just initiates the debate on how should Europe or the European Union look tomorrow or after 10 years. Will it be a Union in which politicians like Viktor Orban will dominate, politicians that use the migrants to impose their own visions on how Europe or EU should look, or, the same spirit that formed the EU will be the predominant one, the spirit of unity, collaboration between nations and tradition?

Europe, and with that the European Union, has to have a common policy, to find a solution on how to protect its external borders. It is necessary to strengthen FRONTEX, and above all, to undertake appropriate measures for solving the crisis in the source itself, which is in the countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

NATO and EU negligence towards the Balkans costs these countries a lot and that cost is increasing constantly. The European safety requires functional institutions, patrolling and monitoring of the border, migration services with biometrical and better capacities against the terrorism. The Balkan countries do not have the necessary capacities and resources. Europe should provide a joint answer to the migrant problem, because no country can solve it only with its own resources. The Republic of Macedonia expects from EU a treatment like a member country. We stress the solidarity and the joint responsibility as essential. Not less important is the need for adopting unified position in solving the challenges with the refugees and urgently addressing the long-standing conflicts as prime cause for the appearance of the migrant-refugee crisis.

In the short term, the USA should work with the EU and the UN to provide technical help for the Balkans. In the long term, Washington and Brussels have to work together to bring Macedonia and the other aspiring countries for EU and NATO membership closer.

The Republic of Macedonia is ready to work closely with the institutions and member states of the European Union in support of further development of the measures for dealing with this global problem. In this situation, the Republic of Macedonia has to be responsible, has to control its own borders, has to perform registration of the migrants due to the national and European regulations and the international law, and has to maintain good foreign policy and diplomatic relations with its neighbors.

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