



Weekly Briefing

**Montenegro External Relations briefing:
Refugee crisis and Montenegro
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Refugee crisis and Montenegro

A new migrant route through the Balkans

As the one of the SEE countries along the so called “Balkan route”, it has been surprising that Montenegro dodged the first wave of refugees arriving from the Middle East and Africa on their way to the Western Europe. Contrary to neighboring Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia, from the beginning of 2015, when European refugee crisis peaked, until the beginning of 2018, only small stream of people entered Montenegro overland through Albania, mostly not seeking asylum and with no intention to stay more than a day before crossing the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The situation rapidly changed in this year after Croatia and Hungary severed control on their borders. According to AFP report, African and Middle-eastern immigrants started to use an “old smuggling route” going from Greece through rugged terrain of Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to cut through the shortest (60 km long) corridor in Croatia connecting Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Schengen area. In March 2018, Bosnian authorities have said that only in the last three months (Dec 2017-Mar 2018) the number of the refugees entering Bosnia and Herzegovina from Montenegro tripled, around 800 were detained at the border while approximately 700 entered illegally.

Border Control Directorate of the Montenegro’s PD has also confirmed rising numbers of immigrants crossing the Montenegro-Albanian border in the last months. Without making any official (and bounding) estimations, it is believed that more than 300 people every month crossed the border illegally and only small number stayed and sought asylum in Montenegro. If we compare data from other neighboring countries and raise some doubts on 1:2 ratio of registered and actual crossovers (following “don’t keep up and carry on” practice of neighboring countries), the real numbers could be significantly higher.

Despite changing figures, social and security impacts in Montenegro are not (yet) visible. Streets, railway stations and the main squares of capital Podgorica (30km away from Albanian border) have no refugees seeking temporary shelter or transportation to the next border. However, as a sign that this possible scenario awaits Montenegro, in April Hungary offered Montenegro a donation of 25 km long razor-wire fence to put up on the border with Albania. The government has not yet disclosed what it will do with this “special tools to help prepare for possibly higher influx of immigrants in Montenegro”. If it decides to build a fence along the Montenegrin border with Albania it could look like admitting the problem which could bring unnecessary public attention and security concerns. Also, the question is also how the European partners will interpret this move: as a necessary measure against the impact of a new wave of refugees that could easily congest Montenegro, or as prematurely siding with “less cooperative” Member States which decided to seal its borders and opposed coordinated action in preventing the escalation of the next migrant wave.

Following the Austrian initiative?

Austrian PM Kurtz pledged after his meeting with Albanian PM Rama in late May that one of the main issues during Austrian presidency of the EU (July-December 2018) will be the migrant crisis and cutting smuggling activities along the Balkan route. Kurtz has also announced that one of the measures will be to more effectively share responsibility under CEAS (Common European Asylum System) and distribute excess number of asylum seekers to non-Member States in the WB and the North Africa.

Central European Member States (V4) argued that the new initiative repeats the previous proposals which ask major burden to be shared by border states, while getting no concrete assurances that the rest of the Member States will give their “due solidarity contribution”. As a result, last week’s EU “mini” Summit was boycotted by V4 countries and already blurred chances for concerted action on upcoming Summit in June 28-29. But the new idea to open

detention centers outside of the EU found firm support in France, Denmark, Luxembourg and Belgium. French President Macron said that the Community will enhance the cooperation with “Libya, other African countries and the Balkans” through which the main route passes.

In a statement issued Wednesday, Montenegro’s PM Markovic, “probably to pre-empt possible decisions of the Summit” announced that Montenegro is also preparing to open a new detention center for refugees. “We are building our capacities, in order to have a better control we have sent a project proposal to the EC to adapt an old Yugoslav border post into detention center for refugees. We will do everything to avoid a wave similar to 2015, which mostly spared Montenegro. But, the route is changing, apparently now goes through Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and continues to Europe,” PM Markovic said.

Critics of the decision argue that Markovic made a major concession that can easily overburden Montenegro’s absorption capacity and given the population size can even bring higher security concerns, moreover, without even trying to score some quid pro quo deal the European partners will remain presumptuously ignorant of asymmetrically higher contribution Montenegro gives for coordinated action. In an article for Analitika, a columnist calculated that the ‘fair contribution’ (calculating the population size and GDP per capita, but also including average income, employment rate and poverty line) Montenegro can provide to receive the asylum seekers is less than a half of its expected quota (1075 people).

The move has also been criticized on the parliament floor. One day after Markovic’s statement, DF member Pavlovic broke in agenda by asking why Premier and some of the opposition leaders accepted the risk of turning Montenegro into European Guantanamo. “In order to continue receiving support from Brussels to stay on power, our prime minister accepted something that Albania refused”, accused Pavlovic. The critique is also directed against the Democrats and URA, the main ‘civic parties’ whose leaders boasted a high-level

meeting with Enlargement Commissioner Hahn last week. They have argued for humanitarian approach to the problem in which Montenegro accepts its due share without questioning what the EU will give in return. Answering to Pavlovic, PM Markovic “assured the public that Montenegro has no intention to receive the migrants from the EU”. Without mentioning the EU, he only pledged to prevent possible migrant crisis Montenegro is facing. However, it was too late to divert the attention that was raised by the coincidence of Markovic’s earlier statement with European “mini” Summit.

What Montenegro can do: between diplomacy and reality

Proponents of the move say building a detention center for refugees is necessary action to avoid the impact the refugee crisis had in Serbia and a small price to pay to have them “at one place instead wandering around the streets”. Undisclosed sources from the government confirmed to the media that a new wave through Montenegro is already happening and that the project might have been undertaken too late.

At present, Montenegro’s capacity to receive asylum seekers is around 150 places. Adapting an old military facility on the Albanian border will add up around 500 places which is just in between ‘assigned’ and ‘fair’ quota. However, the biggest concern is that the problem is still lingering in diplomatic domain and not yet recognized as a real security threat “with huge impact on internal stability, interreligious tolerance and economic situation”. According to the estimates, the new migrant wave can peak with the influx of 2000 people daily while Montenegro has only around 4000 active police officers and much less in disposition during the tourist season. Detention camps that the government planned to commission along the Albanian border if the influx of migrants escalates are expected to receive only couple of thousand of migrants, but the estimates predict 20 000 people (around 3% of total population) to be left stranded in Montenegro if unexpected (but probable) bottlenecks occur on three downstream borders before the Schengen area.

Perhaps more important issue than accepting asylum seekers is the total cost. Some opinions have already come out with “tens of million EUR” as a figure that will cover accommodation, food, clothes and other essentials. Also, as a signatory of international conventions of refugees, Montenegro is expected to provide financial help to asylum seekers. The government decision from April to grant monthly 66.68 EUR per asylum seeker (or 126.77 EUR to families) has been criticized as too generous. Even though the handouts will be funded through the EU subsidiarity help program, the highest handout is around 65% of the minimum wage and higher than average compensation Montenegro’s vulnerable social groups receive through some social assistance programs.

Prevalent opinion in the media is to follow Hungarian and Polish example in bringing the regulation that will restrict the legal stay of refugees and more expediently divert the influx of the immigrants. Emboldened by the Hungarian retreat on humanitarian approach and coordinated action with the other Member States, public opinion is also quietly seeking to scale back European programs for refugees and asylum seekers. Judging from the first reactions after the “mini” Summit, broad public opinion is disdained by colonialist proposal to transfer some of the asylum-seekers to non-Member States or, at best, feels that the peripheral countries should trade lofty compensation for dealing with a mess created by the First World.

This position is not new and definitely not unheard in the WB region but previous EU administration could rely on cooperative governments itself under strains to solve the crisis and popular sentiment that was sympathetic to refugees. Now, after the boycott by V4 countries and failure of the EU to bring up concerted and fair strategy in dealing with the migrant crisis, there is a push by non-Member States to roll back on their own commitments. “Obviously there were some concessions given to Albania in exchange for detention camps on its soil. I only hope that [Premier] Markovic will be able to trade something in return”, was one of the comments posted online.

The talks on transferring asylum seekers to Non-Member States are playing out in parallel with negotiations over major CEAS reforms that is prioritized by the Central Europeans. Individual negotiations with each non-Member country that are expected to follow after the Summit in late June will also depend on the ability of the EU to present unison stance regarding the concessions towards non-Member countries in accommodating asylum seekers. Montenegro signals this would be a hard bargain.