



Weekly Briefing


**Slovenia External Relations briefing:
Western Balkans in the migrant policies of Europe and the related
meetings in June 2018**

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Summary

After the 2015 sudden rise in the number of migrants crossing the Schengen Area borders along the so-called Balkan route, Slovenian government has been looking for a stable and sustainable solution to tackle this phenomenon. A compromise measure, which was widely criticized, of putting wire barriers on the borders with Croatia, was later partly abolished, but in many places the barriers are still in place. The most difficult problem, however, still seems to be negotiating the issue with the immediate neighbors and with other EU member states. The problem of migration policies was recently brought up again, when Frontex warned about the development of new immigration pathways and predicted a new rise in the (otherwise falling) number of migrants on the new Balkan routes. Slovenian government tries to play an active role in negotiating a comprehensive strategy, especially because the location of the country makes it very vulnerable to changing EU and other countries migration policies.

Background: Frontex assessments

A recent assessment by Frontex Deputy Executive Director Berndt Körner at the Europa-Forum Wachau, confirmed many claims already made in the previous month by representatives of the relevant agencies and institutions along the land migration route. He remarked that now, when the route through the Balkans and the sea passage through Central Mediterranean became more difficult, new pathways are emerging. Since 2017 the most dangerous Central Mediterranean route has weakened by 76 percent since. Western Mediterranean Route, however, has increased by 61 percent, and the Eastern by 95 percent (i. e. 21,000) people. Applications by asylum seekers in Germany have increased

from 64,000 in April to roughly 78,000 in May. In general the report was two-sided: on one side it reported a decrease in number of migrants on the existing migration pathways and a low number of detections on external borders, on the other it reported the predicted rise of numbers on the new migration sub-routes. Most notable, these routes go through Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, also contributing to increased pressure on the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, i. e. the outside border of European Union. The highest estimates for the number of migrants in the following months for the border states of EU, Slovenia, Croatia, Austria and Hungary, is 80,000.

Looking for a strategy in the Western Balkans

In this changed situation a new coordinated strategy for mitigating the migration in the Western Balkans is being sought. There is also a pressure from EU representatives and the neighboring countries, especially Austria with the right wing (FPÖ) Minister of Interior Kickl to tackle the problems in this region before the migrants reach EU and/or Schengen Area. IN the beginning of the month, on the 6th of June, there was already a meeting of the heads of police of the Western Balkans countries and wider Europe, where they attempted to devise a civil-military action plan to control the Balkan migration route, agreed on last year in Vienna meeting. The following day, there was a conference of Ministers of Interior of the same countries in Sarajevo. Based on the operative decisions and plans of the previous-day meeting they addressed the problems of asylum policies, the returning of rejected asylum seekers and the concept of »safe third country«. They especially focus on the formation of a new route through the region, the so-called »Adriatic Route«, which goes from Greece to Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and then to Slovenia, which is replacing the former »Balkan route« through Macedonia and Serbia to Croatia and Slovenia. They also agree on include Frontex in monitoring the border between Greece and Albania. A need was expressed to better navigate the intercultural and interreligious issues. Bosnia and Herzegovina also

expressed the urgent need for EU agencies and UN financial support for dealing with the crisis.

On June 14th, Slovenian Minister of Interior Vesna Györkös Žnidar addressed a letter to European Commissioners: High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini; Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship Dimitris Avramopoulos; Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Johannes Hahn; and Commissioner for the Security Union Julian King. The letter was also addressed to the Austrian Minister of Interior Herbert Kickl and Croatian Minister of Interior Davor Božinović. In the letter she presented the conclusions of the June the 6th meeting of Heads of Police, which were subsequently confirmed in Sarajevo meeting of Ministers of Interior. Among the most important conclusions, Györkös Žnidar pointed out the call for better open communication between police forces in relevant countries and the urgent need of consistent registration of migrants in all of the relevant countries to prevent the abuses and use of false identities.

Plans for migration centers outside of EU

On the Sarajevo meeting, the Austrian representative Franz Lang, confirmed plans by Austria and some other countries to establish centers for migrants outside of EU. In such centers, migrants and potential asylum seekers would be registered and housed until their asylum applications would be processed, upon which some would continue their way and others would be returned to the country of departure. By building such centers, migrants would be kept closer to their countries of origin, which would allegedly facilitate the process. In Sarajevo Lang mentioned two potential host countries, Egypt and Ukraine.

A similar plan was confirmed by the Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and few days after Sarajevo meeting it was confirmed also by the Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz. Allegedly the plan was devised by the

Ministers of Interior of Austria, Germany (where Seehofer does not have kanzler Merkel support for this) and Italy. He called the alliance between Rome, Vienna and Berlin »the axis of willing, doubtlessly provoking a lot of problematic historical references. The potential country to host this centre according to Kurz, was now Albania, which is of course in tune with the new migration route, but still it can hardly be seen as a country significantly closer to the places of origin of the migrants. The main point thus now seems to be that migrants should be kept outside of EU and near to the migration route, a criterion, which makes other non-EU Western Balkans countries potential candidates as well.

Salzburg Forum and the European Commission message

On June 14 and 15, Bucharest hosted a meeting of ministers of the Salzburg Forum,

Central European security partnership which includes Western Balkan countries as partner countries. The main topic was how to achieve integrated border management across the region. Special attention was paid to the possibilities of IT aspects of border management, especially the interoperability of information systems in EU and the world. The future of Frontex and its role was also debated. The other important emphasis was on the implementation of a legal regulations package on interoperability, which enables quicker and more efficient border controls and would also help overcome the current »blind spot« due to separated data banks. They also called for a more flexible system of international mutual help between police forces in different countries when dealing with extreme circumstances. They also stressed the importance of the integrative system of interior security in the Western Balkans, which could serve as a starting point for more efficiency in the region.

On June 19 European Commissioner for Migration Dimitris Avramopoulos called a meeting in Brussels for the countries of the Western Balkans. The main message was that the region is not facing a crisis yet, so the region is far from the 2015 circumstances, but the region should be prepared for new potential

events. The efficient control on the borders is a prerequisite to keep the non-visa system in the Western Balkans or even widen it to include Kosovo. Avramopulos also did not comment much on the recently announced plans by Austria, Germany, Italy and others, to place migrant centers on the outside of EU borders, seemingly considering the plan unrealistic. Slovenian representatives also addressed the problem of abuse of asylum seeking procedure, especially related to the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where non-government organizations allegedly help illegal practices of visa abuse.

Conclusions

Despite the numbers of migrants moving along the Balkans route is rather small at the moment, many fears and plans are dealing with a potential new big rise in the number of migrants. From more practical issues, dealt with on the meetings, to the overall strategy, several meetings have addressed the problem. The main obstacles to overcome to have a strong migration managing capacity in EU are the adaptation of the legal framework for the mutual exchange of information. A more flexible system of mutual solidarity between police forces and other institutions also seems indispensable. The solo actions of the groups of countries is also become an issue to be solved, otherwise the consequences might be very damaging to the solidarity in EU and the Schengen system in general.