



Weekly Briefing

Croatia External Relations briefing:
A New Balkan Migration Route: Croatia and Border Protection
Benjamin Petrović

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

A New Balkan Migration Route: Croatia and Border Protection

After facing a migrant crisis in 2016, Croatia, along with other regional countries had a short period of calm. Two years later, a new migrant route is surging. This time it is a slightly different path, but with the same goal. That implies a new security and humanitarian challenge for Croatia, its neighbors and the European Union, still recovering from the political turmoil caused by the first migrant wave.

A new Balkan migration route

Escaping war, poverty, dictatorships and oppressive political systems, in 2015, thousands of people from the Middle East, Asia and Northern Africa fled to Europe in search for their safety. Such action caused a migrant crisis that shook Europe and the world. The main migration trajectory was the Balkan route. At the pinnacle of crisis in 2016 and after many international initiatives towards the countries affected by it the most, that route was closed.

As a direct consequence, a new Balkan route was created. This Balkan route passes from Greece, through Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia, and causes a great concern. Not only that a new threat of massive migration wave towards central Europe is generated, but the new route is the same one used by weapons and drug traffickers. Therefore, there is potential for a different kind of security issues. These issues, however, mean a familiarity of Croatian and regional police and security forces with the route, and because of that, there is a stronger possibility in preventing potential crime proliferation.

Migration path through Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia

A threat of a new migration wave caused instant divisions in European political structures, to which the European Council, in June 2018, answered

through a set of conclusions and agreements on establishing a new approach to migrations that should benefit migrants but also migration affected countries.

Although in numbers much smaller, new migration route proves itself as a tough challenge to national governments, especially of Bosnia and Herzegovina where migrants tend to stay the longest so questions of intake capacity are being raised. Camps for migrant admission are developed, but small in numbers, so there is a possibility that with a continuing intake of migrants there will not be enough space for their accommodation. Bosnian authorities also stress a strong cooperation with international organizations such as International Organization for Migration and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that invest in better capacities and improved conditions of admission facilities. There is also the matter of a 1000 kilometers long border of challenging terrain with Croatia, which is a difficult task to patrol.

Because of that, a pathway through Bosnia and Herzegovina is not that strenuous for migrants as the one through Croatia, even though it is much shorter. After reaching towns of Velika Kladuša and Bihać near the Croatian border, where migrants receive humanitarian aid and supplies, mostly from civilian population, they use any means at their disposal to cross the Croatian border, even paying traffickers. Migrants tend to cross the territory of Croatia at its narrowest part between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia, 70 kilometers around the area of the city of Karlovac.

Taken into consideration that Croatian Ministry of Interior and its police forces are prepared in anticipation of looming migrant influx, migrants travel exclusively at night, on foot through woods and fields. Those who have money and connections hire smugglers from both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, but in such way put themselves in far greater peril because of the high level of surveillance on smuggler routes. In such ways, new Balkan route is not only far less massive but also far less disorganized. It follows known but intertwined trajectories and more expensive, illegal routes. River Kupa, that serves as a

border between Croatia and Slovenia is another threat to the safety of migrants because of its strong currents. Several of them had died in attempts to cross it.

To the greatest extent, the method of Croatian authorities towards migrants was readmission in order to protect the sovereignty of Croatian borders and it is yet to be seen if that policy will change in case of surge in migrant numbers. The main point of focus is however fight against crime, illegal border crossing and trafficking. Croatian Minister of Interior, Davor Božinović, stated that European Council conclusions are fully in line with Croatia's migration policy – legal, controlled and sustainable migration that entails protecting the border from illegal crossings, supporting the relocation policy as a legal way of arriving in Europe, solidarity with refugees' need for international protection, but to an extent that will not overload Croatia's reception and administration capacities. Božinović also added that Croatia will remain an open country without barriers and barbed wire, empathetic with refugees in real need of protection, but which does not allow illegal migration and stops traffickers.

Facing migration issues and border protection in Croatia

From perspective of Croatia, the Croatian Ministry of the Interior has the main responsibility in facing the described occurrences. Firstly, it has to coordinate the actions between itself and ministries of interior and security services of neighboring countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia. Together, these countries are coping with protection of their borders and prevention of criminal activities that come in hand. Therefore, police forces are strengthening border patrols around crisis areas and their reaction readiness is on a high degree. Croatian police forces have adopted new measures in their training and methodology in order to achieve a better competence in confronting unconventional threats and issues.

Secondly, a matter that must not be neglected, but often comes juxtaposed to the previously mentioned responsibilities, is the protection of human rights of those displaced looking for a safe heaven. Proper care, medical aid and

provision of supplies is a humanitarian expectation that all countries which serve as a part of the migrant route are to meet. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković noted that Croatia is investing in strengthening its capacities for accepting migrants regardless of conclusions and agreements on the international level. “We have centres in Zagreb and Kutina. We must raise those capacities independently of these conclusions.”

Consequently, police forces and other collaborative services act not only as law enforcers, but also as care givers. In a way, migrant crisis has led to a different paradigm in law enforcing, compelling law enforcement services to introduce a broader and more comprehensive framework of their operations. In face of a serious difficulty, that is balancing between law enforcing on an operational level and providing security and safe passage on a humanitarian level. Croatian government, Ministry of the Interior and other accountable institutions encounter a need to react accordingly. That leads to a change of perspective in border protecting and police work as mentioned above.

Furthermore, a scope of migration route covers several countries in southeast Europe, with an emphasis on the western and southern Balkans. Therefore, regional cooperation and interoperability is a must. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stressed that boosting cooperation in readmission, returns and the exchange of information with Southeast European countries is “the most important thing for Croatia.”

Preserving Schengen borders and role of Frontex

The new migration route has also caught the eye of the European Union because of its potential to endanger the functioning and stability of the Schengen Area. That implies necessity for control of external borders, fighting trafficking and various smuggling activities. Croatia, a member state, but not a participant of the Schengen Agreement, must prove itself capable of protecting the external borders of the European Union in order to actualize its ambition to become a Schengen participant by 2020.

Other method of reaching its goal to become a Schengen member state is international aid to countries which accommodate a large number of migrants and investment in EU trust funds. Croatia has proved itself in that notion too. Prime Minister Plenković said in September 2018 that Croatia is regularly making payments. He added that “the fifth installment is about to go to Turkey. Then we have one more and all together that will be almost six million euro, which is very solid considering the size of our country. I think that we have shown to be constructive and serious, just as we have with regard to secondary migrations within the EU.”

Another source of responsibility for assisting with the migrant flow is Frontex. Facing its second biggest challenge since the original migrant crisis, in this instance, Frontex can lead national police and security services through standards of procedure based on European values. As an authority in guarding the borders of the European Union, Frontex is obligated to offer help through surveillance technologies and support in monitoring crisis areas. In mid-September 2018, the European Commission decided to reform Frontex into becoming a real European coast and border guard. However, some southern EU member states are skeptical and in fear of their sovereignties being endangered. Prime Minister Plenković was adamant in claiming that Croatia’s cooperation with Frontex is excellent, but, as far as Croatia’s abilities are concerned, there is no need for additional assistance and that migrations issues should be resolved at a place of their origin.

A contrary view comes from neighboring Slovenia, where a high number of captured illegal migrants on the border with Croatia is becoming too much to handle. Slovenia considers Croatia’s protection of the external borders of the European Union rather porous. Boštjan Šefic, the State Secretary at the Slovenian Ministry of Interior, said that Slovenia could be forced to take measures which could lead to closing the Schengen border with Croatia. Slovenia itself is under strong pressure from Austria, whose conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is determined to discourage migrants from setting off

to Europe. Supporting the reform of Frontex, Kurz said that “there can be no open borders within Europe without proper protection of external EU borders.” Such claims were acknowledged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a strong proponent of the announced Frontex reform.

Conclusion

Even though the new Balkan migration route has not reached the scale of the previous one in 2015 and 2016, the potential for a massive migrant influx is always large, depending on the situations in crisis areas in the Middle East, Asia and Northern Africa. Croatia, along with other neighboring and regional countries is faced with a tall order. Border protecting, fighting trafficking and smuggling but also protection of innocent lives and respect towards issues of the displaced must go hand in hand in order to successfully contain and resolve potential crisis that arose from tragedy.