



Weekly Briefing

Croatia external relations briefing:

A new refugee crisis; context, implications and EU readiness under Croatian presiding over the Council of the European Union

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Summary

A series of events shaping the future of war-torn Syria caused turbulences between main actors in the long lasting civil war, Turkey being one of them. With 3.7 million refugees in their camps, and expensive military operations in Northern Syria, the ability and readiness of Turkey to control the stream of refugees diminished and broke. Europe, with Croatia presiding over the Council of the European Union, is faced with another potential refugee crisis, and a challenge to prove that it has learned its lessons from the one in 2015.

Introduction

In October 2019, after paying a visit to Greece and Turkey and getting a chance to observe the situation with refugee intake in person, German Minister of Interior Horst Seehofer warned Europe that a new refugee crisis is on the horizon, one which could exceed the 2015 crisis in its scale, humanitarian and security challenges. Recognizing the failure of the European Union in providing more than solidarity to the countries protecting its outer borders, Seehofer called for additional cooperation between the EU countries in controlling the intake of refugees. Also, a high emphasis was directed at Turkey which was at the brink of opening the doors to Europe for around 3,7 million refugees in camp settlements, after president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's demands for extra funds for control of the migrant stream and support in developing a buffer zone in Northern Syria were ignored. According to the 2016 deal between the European Commission and Ankara, a package of six billion Euros was promised as a tool for Turkey to prevent the further dramatic influx of refugees in Europe. But as the Civil War in Syria kept on going in ever growing tragic and damaging proportions, which led to Turkey's military invasion of Northern Syria in order to prevent the strengthening of People's Protection Units (YPG), perceived by Turkey as a Kurdish terrorist organization, the costs of leading military operations, controlling the refugee intake and attempting to build a security zone with the necessary infrastructure, proved to be too high. In the early months of 2020, after a series of warnings towards the EU, Turkey was unable and unwilling to withstand the different pressures which led to an outflow of refugees on Turkish-Greek border towards Europe. In that way, the

previously mentioned prediction of another migrant crisis was realized, but it is yet to be determined whether it will reach the levels of the previous one in 2015.

Geopolitical context of the refugee crisis

Before delving deeper into everything that the current refugee crisis would bring in the shape of humanitarian, security and economic aspects, especially from the point of EU and Croatia as a member state currently presiding over the Council of the European Union, it is important to provide additional context and shed light to geopolitical elements of the never stopping crisis. As it was already mentioned, since the mid-2016, Turkey has been directly involved in the military operations in Syria, with a clear goal of removing People's Protection Units (YPG) from the area of Northern Syria, bordering Turkey. The reason for that lies behind the fact that YPG units consist of Kurdish personnel, and in the eyes of Ankara, Kurds in Turkey and beyond are seen as a threat to national identity and political stability. Turkey has a tragic history of oppression related to Kurds and its political representative Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), perceived as a terrorist organization. Therefore, YPG units in Syria are recognized as a branch of PKK and an inherent threat to Turkey and its interests in the region. But, Turkey is not the only actor in the long lasting Civil War. Russia and Iran are the other two countries participating in political decision-making processes which shape the future of Syria and the region.

Syria – a geostrategic playground

After successfully and almost completely defeating the Islamic State, the next enemy of Russia and Iran-backed Syrian regime were the disintegrated rebel groups still fighting against the oppressive and corrupt rule of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. With unified pressure of military operations, those groups were pushed to Idlib province in Northwest Syria where vast territories were held by members of the former al-Nusra Front, backed by al-Qaeda. Under al-Nusra Front, some of the mentioned rebel groups managed to organize under the same flag of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). It must be noted that the Idlib province is of great strategic importance not only for Syria, but the whole region. Its traffic corridors, M4 and M5 highways, connect all four sides of Syria, and provide significant value in the geopolitical and economic positioning for Russia and preserving clear contact lines with Shia allies like Hezbollah and Hamas for Iran. After the deal made by President Erdogan and the President of the United States Donald Trump in October 2019, it was agreed that the US Forces will withdraw from Northern Syria and provide Turkey with freedom to uphold its idea of establishing a secure zone along

the Turkish-Syrian border. Such a nonsensical decision provided Ankara with a free pass to begin operations against Syrian Kurdistan, and Kurdish YPG units were left strategically and morally alone and devastated. Furthermore, it must be noted that the mentioned act opened space for Erdogan's solution of the migrant crisis in the shape of changing the ethnical landscape of Northern Syria by settling around two million refugees from Turkish camps to a potentially new, Kurds free area.

Failed agreement

Moreover, it is valuable to mention that since September 2018, and the agreement from Sochi between Russia and Turkey, certain rebel held areas in Idlib province were established as demilitarized zones with security check points under the supervision of Turkey which had the responsibility to control the rebel groups and force them to give up arms in order to achieve functionality in the troubled region. Nevertheless, as Ankara was more focused on suppressing Kurdish units from their positions, various rebel and militant groups, especially Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, continued wrecking-havoc and encouraging Moscow and the Damascus regime to proceed with military operations towards the demilitarized area, basically making the Sochi agreement worthless. Inevitably, the series of events led to clashes between the regime and the Turkish forces with continuous heavy losses from the Turkish side. In early days of March 2020, enraged Erdogan began a retaliatory military operation "Spring Shield" and announced Turkey's unpreparedness to withstand inevitable new influx of refugees from Syria, along with the 3,7 million already accepted.

In order to present the breaking of the 2016 agreement with the EU as necessary, Turkey asked for NATO's support in operations in Idlib, presenting the opening of its borders towards Europe as desperate measures. Careful in positioning itself against Turkey, NATO condemned the military operations of the Damascus regime towards Turkish forces and demanded for a prompt de-escalation of conflict. But any type of military and intelligence aid for Turkey was disregarded. At the time of writing, certain moderation of conflict between the Syrian regime and the Turkish forces has been established in Idlib, but the rebel forces, some with obvious Turkish backing, keep causing damage to infrastructure, property and lives of civilians, enabling the growth of refugee streams towards Europe.

A challenge for Europe

What must be emphasized is the fact that regardless of the aforementioned warning by the German Minister of Interior Seehofer, about the looming crisis that could hit the European Union, the EU's role in containing the described series of events in war-torn Syria on any level, or providing logistical or infrastructural assistance to Turkey or its member states like Greece which protect its outer borders, was non-existent. Busy with promoting the pan-European values of the new president of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and complete restructuring of its institutions, the main European political body found itself paralyzed because of the inability to reach an agreement on the Multiannual Financial Framework, a key element in developing any common strategy, beyond declaratory ones. Therefore, as the first large refugee groups started pressing the Greek and Bulgarian borders with Turkey, it quickly became clear that the European Union states will have only themselves to rely on. Greece, under its Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, is now facing the highest level of pressure, with hundreds of refugees reaching its islands, and thousands attempting to cross its border. Considering that Greece must take into account the responsibility of protecting the EU borders, one of the first measures was the adoption of suspension of any new asylum applications for a month.

As around 13 000 refugees who were stationed in Turkish camps proceeded towards the Balkan Route with a goal of reaching their destinations in Middle and Western Europe via Southeast Europe, their first challenge was crossing the land border between Turkey and Greece. As it was previously mentioned, Greek border is also the border of the European Union, therefore, a unified action from all the EU institutions and member states was needed to avoid the potential crisis. Croatia, the youngest EU member state, but still not a member of the Schengen Area, responsible for presiding over the Council of the European Union, with a previous experience of successfully curbing the refugee wave and controlling the chaotic situation in the previous crisis, has a tall order of preparing for steering the EU decision making processes for the incoming wave. Besides that, there is a previously developed pressure on its border coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, faced with a long-term refugee situation on its own.

First reactions of solidarity

Immediately after the first waves of refugees were stopped at the Greek border, a delegation consisting of the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, the Croatian Minister of Interior Davor Božinović, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the

European Council President Charles Michel and the European Parliament President David Sassoli, visited the border in order to provide their solidarity to the Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis. It was promised that Frontex, an EU agency tasked with border control of the European Schengen Area, would provide assistance in the shape of patrolling vehicles, surveillance equipment, and man power in order to achieve border stability. Additionally, von der Leyen stated that the EU would provide a financial push of 700 million Euros for Greece, even though the Multiannual Financial Framework from which such means should be available, was still not ready at the time. Prime Minister Plenković stressed how the Croatian national interest is in line with the Greek and the EU's and it is border protection and prevention of any crisis. Also, urgent meetings of ministers of interior and ministers of defense of EU member states were announced in order to tackle potential unified response towards the looming crisis. Such first reactions, promises of financial aid and coordinated meetings, could be seen as an indication of slight progress from previous actions. It seems that the EU has learned its lessons and that the response to any new potential refugee crisis could be more systematic, common in practice, and by the same token harsh in its execution.

Measures to undertake

Multilateral meetings of ministers of defense of the EU countries immediately raised eyebrows because Europe, in its wish to avoid another disaster, could pursue finding the solution to the refugee wave primarily from security perspective, using military tools only, and disregarding the humanitarian, political and economic aspects. In case of using the Armed Forces of the Republic of Croatia to help the Croatian police forces to protect its borders, the President of Croatia Zoran Milanović stated that such a decision should be systematically analyzed through rational approach. Therefore, on the 5th of March 2020, a Croatian National Security Council session was convened on which the mentioned subject was discussed. It must be noted that all of the Croatian political and military officials and representatives who were asked about the matter agreed that the military aid to the police forces could be used as an additional tool, in line with its constitutional powers and constraints. Even though the Croatian Law on defense and Law on surveillance of state border grant permission to the military to provide assistance in border protection to the police force, the proscribed procedures on the implementation of such a measure and the operational range of Armed Forces are slightly unclear. Therefore, before making any haste decisions on a national or EU level, a wide range of solutions must be prepared in order to develop effective, all-encompassing actions in line with national budgets and constitutional restraints.

Conclusion

At the moment of writing, the refugee crisis pressing Europe from the Turkish-Greek border lies in the shadow of a global pandemic caused by the spread of a new type of coronavirus COVID-19, emerging from the city of Wuhan in China. As the number of deaths in 202 virus stricken countries reaches almost 30 000, special security measures are enforced worldwide, with the travel ban being one of them. Refugees positioned on border crosses are provided with humanitarian care, but there are great amounts of those using illegal paths. Such cases cause not only a threat of illegal migration, but also a health threat, and an additional burden for security institutions and forces. Be that as it may, the first several months of 2020 proved to be challenging for both nation states and global community, and unified, clear and pragmatic policies and decisions are needed more than ever.