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Managing Migration: The Balkans United against Refugees

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In 2015, alone, almost a million refugees sought to reach Northwestern Europe by traveling from Turkey, through Greece and Macedonia, and then across Serbia, Hungary, or Croatia, following what became known as the Balkan route. Despite the numerous problems associated with this route, it remained functional until March 8, 2016, when the EU member states reached a deal with Turkey that has put a stop to this particular migrants' itinerary.

Like the member states of the European Union, the Balkan countries have been dealing with migration problems in an obsolete manner. Wars and their attendant difficulties in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s generated huge surges of refugees. Nonetheless, despite the experience of dealing with these surges, the Balkan countries, like the member states of the European Union, have failed to respond appropriately to the current migration and refugee crises.

The experience of the 2015 influx of migrants and refugees into the European Union has shown that it is of paramount importance to find an alternative way to deal with migration issues, which would entail a fundamental shift in migration policies in line with global technological developments and geopolitics.

In Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, the last country to join the European Union, citizens rallied at an event organized by the “Welcome” initiative on the city square on March 11, 2016. Their demonstration in protest against a recent agreement made in Brussels by the EU member states with Turkey to tackle the migrant crisis led to Croatia’s decision to close its borders to refugees, thus providing smugglers with ample opportunity to abuse the situation and illegally transfer refugees across borders, while putting their lives in peril. The protesters carried banners that read, “The President and Prime Minister were also economic migrants,” “You’re throwing people into the hands of smugglers,” “There is no ‘us’ and ‘them,’ we are all people,” “You will go down in history with your barbed wires.” To the sound of African trumpets, they criticized the Croatian government’s position that “Zero refugees is a good result for Croatia” and insisted that providing a safe haven to everyone in need of protection and safety would be a good result for Croatian society, which, like the rest of the former Yugoslavia, had suffered from war and displacement during the 1990s.¹ In those days, Croatia’s migration policy was dictated at the national level and refugee reception centers were opened by local communities and international organizations. As a host country, however, Croatia proved to be selective, denying protection by the state and local communities to a large outflow of Serbian refugees.

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According to the official records of the countries along the Balkan route, leading from Greece through Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary and Croatia, the only migrants who are now crossing the borders are those who possess regular documents in compliance with visa requirements. After the March 2016 agreement, Serbia's interior minister, Nebojša Stefanović, announced that Serbia "will abide by the policy of the EU and of the neighbouring countries on the Balkan route" and that Serbia will take every measure to show its human face but that "it also has to look after its own people." He said that the Serbian police had been deployed along Serbian borders and that Serbia will "not allow the migrants' first contact with Serbia to be in breach of the law." He added that about 1,200 people were stranded in Serbia in the migration process, of which 285 sought asylums in Serbia only to gain time before continuing their journey to Northern Europe. Some, he said, asked to return to their country of origin, and since Serbia has bilateral agreements on readmission with some countries, these will be applied in solving these refugees' status.²

Just a day after the announcement of the decision between the European Union and Turkey to close the Balkan route, however, continuing activities by smugglers indicated that they would encroach on the legal movement of people on the Balkan route. Gordan Paunović, a Serbian activist, stated that with the closing of the Balkan route after the EU-Turkey summit in Brussels, the concept of seeking refuge has been "outlawed and criminalized." Although according to official data no one had crossed the Serbian border since the agreement, he and other activists counted between 50 and 100 migrants crossing illegally on that day.³ Large groups of Kurds and Afghanis arrived in Belgrade; they had traveled through Sophia to the Bulgarian border with Serbia, where they were picked up by vehicles with Serbian number plates. For the "discreet" transport from Sophia to the Serbian border, Paunović claimed, they paid in excess of a thousand euros, with an additional three hundred euros paid in Belgrade. He added: "Following the closing of the Balkan route, the number of people entering the country will decrease, but the number of illegal entries will grow. Sooner or later, these people will reach Germany, Austria or Sweden but they will not be part of the system and will not be protected on that route." Paunović admonished that consequent to Brussels' decision to close the Balkan route, the situation in no-man's land between Macedonia and Serbia escalated from a humanitarian crisis to a humanitarian disaster, because none of the countries involved has allowed these people to go forth or go back, and the only help they have received is provided by Doctors Without Borders through a section of the barbed-wire fence on the Macedonian side.⁴ The refugees in no-man's land realize that seeking asylum in Serbia is the only chance they have of becoming "legal" and getting food and shelter. The number of these cases is on the rise as refugees obtain documents that allow them to apply at asylum centers. About 450 Syrians from no-man's land could be granted asylum in Serbia, and some of them have therefore stayed in Serbia and decided not to go north. The problem is that in Serbia, the procedure for processing asylum applications, even for the asylum seekers from war-torn countries in the Middle East who arrived much earlier, is very slow. In a well-known case in Belgrade, a distinguished medical doctor has spent the past two years waiting for a resolution to his civil status, and all the while he has been getting messages that only the minister of police can make a decision about his case.

The Balkans versus Refugees

The countries on the Balkan route were intent on directing refugees to their final destination: Austria, Germany, or Sweden. Now these Balkan countries fear that they could become the refugees' final destination. During an EU-Balkans summit in Brussels in October 2015, the talks focused on how to improve conditions for the migrant flow and prevent chaos at the

borders of the countries on the Balkan route. An unofficial decision was made to allow refugees only from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to continue north from Greece. Immediately after these talks, Slovenia and Croatia adopted this decision, changing the approach of the Balkan states toward newcomers. Later, when Germany opened a debate about whether to accord war refugee status to people fleeing from Afghanistan, the countries on the Balkan route denied passage to Afghans, treating them as so-called economic migrants. This unanimity among the Balkan states and their leaders on the refugee issue was seemingly unprecedented. For the next several months, hundreds of thousands of refugees were directed through the transit countries of the Balkan route to the “host countries.” In 2015, out of a total of almost a million refugees, 1,587 applied for asylum in Macedonia, while Croatia, an EU member state, received 140 requests for asylum. Brussels repeatedly appealed to Macedonia, a non-European Union country, to stop the surge of migrants.

Early in February 2016, Austria announced that it would accept 80 asylum requests a day and then restricted the number of refugees it would accept in a year to 37,500. In response, the governments of the countries on the Balkan route announced their unanimous position: to align their policies with those of Austria and Germany, to allow entrance to those who clearly will be able to continue their journey north, and to jointly register and profile the refugees on the Greek-Macedonian border. They justified their position by claiming a lack of governmental capacity to welcome significant numbers of refugees.

Soon thereafter, Macedonia sealed off its borders almost completely, Serbia energetically deployed border police, special units, and army forces to patrol its border territories, and Croatia announced it would send military detachments to protect its borders. Even countries on the outskirts of the Balkan route showed uneasiness. The Albanian government announced that “a large number of refugees” were making their way to Albania, and the Bulgarian prime minister ordered joint police and military exercises in the regions bordering Greece and Macedonia. In February 2016, 95,000 migrants crossed into Serbia, of which 1,178 sought asylum. Within a few days, 1,100 of them had already left the country, heading northwest to Austria.

In reaction to the policy decisions made by Balkan countries, German chancellor Angela Merkel declared, “Closing the Balkan migrant route does not resolve the problem and will not be sustainable.”⁵ Despite the German position on the Balkan route closure, in the wake of the March 2016 summit and the closing of the Balkan route, Europe has had to grapple with xenophobia, compelling tens of thousands of refugees who reached Macedonia to seek dangerous deals with migrant smugglers who, according to media reports, have demanded three thousand U.S. dollars per person to smuggle refugees to the Hungarian and Croatian borders.

Migrants who reach Greece are left with one option: seeking alternative routes to the countries of the European Union. Bosnia and Herzegovina have not yet been affected by the migrant surge, but there are signs that an alternative Adriatic route may open through Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia and Slovenia. If such a route does open, even partially, these Balkan countries could take responsibility for the destinies of many of the unfortunate families fleeing the Middle Eastern war theater. Geographically, this route could be very difficult, and it is believed that the European Union would try to prevent the opening of new routes after the closure of the Balkan route. Yet, while these states claim that they are responsive to humanitarian issues and are willing to assist in coordinating the flow of refugees, they are not prepared to offer permanent sanctuary to any significant number of migrants. They hope that the “Adriatic route” will never be opened and that a solution will be found if the European Union can establish a direct corridor for asylum seekers from Turkey.

Merkel is quietly pushing for a “coalition of the willing” that will take in refugees directly from Turkey, thus rendering the Mediterranean and Balkan routes redundant. At the same time, the countries of the Visegrád Group are persistently advocating for stopping the surge of refugees at the Greek-Macedonian border, and they are supported by Austria. This thirty-seven-kilometer stretch of Macedonian border is sealed off by a double, razor-sharp, eight-foot-high fence imported from Hungary. The objective is to close the more easily accessible areas along the Vardar River around Đevđelija, and to patrol the difficult-to-access mountain and lake territories. These territories will be patrolled by the special police forces of the Visegrád Group.

The Center for the Protection and Assistance to Asylum Seekers claims that Serbia and Macedonia cannot stop the intercontinental migration of people: “Stopping people on European soil is impossible, because they will find a way to get where they’re going.”⁶ So far, the option advocated by the Visegrád Group has prevailed over the policy of Germany and the European Commission.

Approximately 10 percent of the people who arrived in Serbia did not take the Balkan route from Greece through Macedonia but, rather, crossed the Turkish border to Bulgaria and then embarked on a 240-kilometer trek across Bulgarian territory to the Serbian border, which means that tens of thousands of people have come to Serbia from Bulgaria. Although Sophia also announced it would build fences on its border with Turkey and Greece, it has not yet done so. Migrants coming through Bulgaria have faced another problem, however, the brutality of the Bulgarian police, whose tactics have been strongly condemned by humanitarian organizations. The *Wall Street Journal* reported in September 2016 that the Bulgarian police had hauled hundreds of smugglers, drivers, and even fellow officers into court in recent months. When the part-time, amateur smugglers were scared away, however, the business was taken over by “professionals” and migrants were “thrown into the hands of organized criminals.”⁷

The German television service Deutsche Welle reported that sixty people from Pakistan, Iraq, Morocco, Afghanistan, and Somalia were arrested in Romania in January 2016. They were equipped with night-vision devices and they entered Romania from Serbia with the intention of crossing into Hungary from the Romanian side. Around the same time, several attempts were also made to cross the Danube River from Bulgaria and reach Hungary through Romanian territory. Also, Afghani groups came from Central Asia through Ukraine and Moldavia to Romania with the intention of crossing the Hungarian border. Orban’s government in Hungary, however, has continuously threatened to seal off the border with Romania, which is even longer (443 km) than the borders Hungary sealed off with Serbia (151 km) and Croatia (329 km).⁸

The End of Cosmopolitanism in the Balkans

In this era of high-tech global communications networks, all theories favoring cosmopolitanism fail the first practical test. The belief that every citizen of the world must receive equal treatment wherever he or she goes was plausible only when the world was nationally divided and distanced, when state borders posed obstacles to knowledge about other territories, far-away countries, and continents.

The communication technology revolution has changed everything. Electronic media and social networks have allowed people across the globe to become better connected and better informed. Until recently, for example, Syrians received news from relatives and friends who had left the country in search of a better and safer life only by letter. The Balkan countries would allow only the occasional Middle Eastern national with proper documents and a visa to cross their borders on their way to some of the more advanced European countries. Most of

these people would go no farther than Germany, prompted to stay there by a very liberal German migrant policy.

Through electronic media, however, people living in the Middle East learned about life in the West, and the contacts they made through social networks contributed to the development of cosmopolitan views about leaving native lands and moving to wealthier countries with better prospects. Thus, refugees fleeing war-torn regions in the Middle East were soon joined by those who saw the surge of refugees as an opportunity to abandon their own lesser developed countries and move to the more stable and richer West. Many such immigrants, both “regular” and “irregular,” as the West describes them, sought to reach Northwestern Europe by traveling from Turkey, through Greece and Macedonia, and then across Serbia, Hungary, or Croatia, following what became known as the Balkan route. Despite the numerous problems associated with this route, it remained functional until March 8, 2016, when the EU member states, at the Brussels summit with Turkey, decided to put a stop to this particular migrants’ itinerary.

Like the member states of the European Union, the Balkan countries have been dealing with migration problems in an obsolete manner. Wars and their attendant difficulties in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s generated huge surges of refugees. Nonetheless, despite the experience of dealing with these surges, the Balkan countries, like the member states of the European Union, have failed to respond appropriately to the current migration and refugee crises. No major initiatives have been launched and no one has advocated for different migrant policies and treatment of refugees. The idea of cosmopolitanism, however, provides an opportunity to change how the migrant and refugee problem is being tackled and to gain insight into the global future, in line with the technological advancement and the political awakening of the global population.

Cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings are citizens of one world in which there are no hard borders, is an essential element in any effort to deal with continuous migration. The ability to move from one place to another without restriction is one of the basic human rights guaranteed by the founding documents of the European Union. The division of the globe into nations and their borders is an impediment to restructuring the world in a cosmopolitan way.

It would appear, however, that migration in practice poses a major test for cosmopolitanism in theory and practice. The increase in the number of economic migrants and war refugees from Northern Africa and the Middle East has triggered the growth of antic cosmopolitan views in Central European countries. Since the onset of the migrant crisis, the sharpest reaction was recorded in Hungary, which viewed migrants as a threat to the nation’s culture and identity, a threat to the democratic state, which allegedly cannot function under the pressure of such a great influx of people.

National and international political organizations have failed to define the basis of a cosmopolitan order in general, and a clear framework of migration policies in particular. UN conventions identify the right to leave a territory as a human right, but nothing is said about the right to enter another territory. Once migrants cross borders and enter the territory of any EU member state, as immigrants, they are entitled to protection and safety under the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the European Convention on Human Rights, both of which give migrants the right to seek asylum. The European Union’s migration and asylum policies are also set forth in the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam.

This humanitarian approach depoliticizes migrants by reducing them to mere human bodies that need to be managed within the boundaries of refugee camps, affirming Hannah Arendt’s insights into the hardships suffered by refugees and stateless people. In her 1943 study “We Refugees,” she suggests that the condition of refugees and stateless persons is a new paradigm of policy because history demonstrates that refugees are the “avant-garde of

their people.”⁹ But Arendt’s theoretical approach has not been taken seriously in political practices dictating treatment of refugees. On this issue, the world has made no progress since the major refugee crisis Arendt refers to in the aftermath of World War II.

Since the Arab Spring revolts and increasing tensions in North Africa and the Middle East, the number of migrants and requests for asylum in the EU member states has soared. Reception facilities in Italy, Greece, and Hungary have been overwhelmed. The conditions in these facilities have deteriorated and the processes for receiving refugees have been slowed by bottlenecks primarily because the entire concept of running reception centers has not changed significantly since the end of the World War II. Humanitarian refugee centers were designed for possible short-term waves of people fleeing regions that are far from EU territories. The EU external border management policy is based on financing border management infrastructure in third-world countries, on conducting campaigns to deter prospective migrants from coming to Europe, and on designing and erecting local reception centers in the transit countries. Development of asylum and integrative systems within the EU member states has been neglected. Under such conditions, the current failure of this border management system had a spill-over effect on other elements of the functioning of the European Union, resulting in, among other issues, the vulnerability of the Schengen area of free movement, poor cooperation and lack of solidarity among the member states, rising intolerance by local populations toward incoming refugees, and chaos in road transport. Already by 2014, it was clear that the wave of migrants was about to flood the European Union. During that year, more than 244,000 illegal migrants managed to get into the EU member states through the Mediterranean route. The establishment of the Balkan route led to an even greater influx of migrants into those states. In 2015, alone, almost a million refugees crossed borders en route to the EU states.

Governments of all states should stop thinking about refugee camps as temporary places, Kilian Kleinschmidt, one of the world’s leading humanitarian activists, says. He adds, “Refugee camps,” he says, “are the cities of tomorrow, not just rapidly expanding temporary accommodation facilities. The average stay today in a camp is 17 years. That’s a generation. In the Middle East, we were building camps: storage facilities for people. But the refugees were building a city.”¹⁰

The world’s population growing at an accelerating rate and because of the revolution in the development of communications and transport, people all over the world are aware of the quality of life elsewhere and the ease of travel. Thus, there is no point in continuing to uphold migrant policies that are not effective. Conventional borders are no longer sustainable. Furthermore, “integration processes,” which are based on constructed national cultures, may need re-examination and reconstruction.

We must find an alternative way to deal with migration issues. The alternative way would entail a fundamental shift in migration policies in line with global technological development and geopolitics. A globalized world requires a re-examination of national borders and their practicality. Envisioning a different, fairer world, built on principles of equality, may seem naïvely philanthropic and humanistic, but it is already happening on social networks around the world. As Lesek Kolakovski points out:

A cosmopolite, or a citizen of the world, is not someone who is indifferent to the plight of his people, or someone who recognizes no ethnic affiliation, but merely a man concerned with worldly matters, open to the most varied assets that the world and other people have to offer, a man who believes that despite all the horrors, wars and persecutions there is such a thing as the common destiny of mankind, in which everybody takes part.¹¹

Notes

¹ Petak, "U Zagrebu protest zbog zatvaranja granica," B92, March 11, 2016, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2016&mm=03&dd=11&nav_category=167&nav_id=1106719.

² Tanjug, "Stefanović: Srbija ne može da primi 100.000 migranata," *Blic*, March 10, 2016, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/stefanovic-srbija-ne-moze-da-primi-100000-migranata/n4pqtmb>.

³ Vesti, "Paunović: Zvanično 0, ilegalno svakog dana do 100 izbeglica," N1, October 3, 2016, <http://rs.n1info.com/a141750/Vesti/Paunovic-izbeglice-i-dalje-stizu-ali-ilegalno.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tanjug, "Merkel: Zatvaranje balkanske rute ne rešava problem," *Blic*, March 10, 2016, <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/merkel-zatvaranje-balkanske-rute-ne-resava-problem/s1cw4m0>.

⁶ CZA and European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "U sredistu pažnje - Da li smo spremni za novi talas izbeglica?," May 24, 2016, <http://www.apc-cza.org/sr-YU/>.

⁷ Drew Hinshaw, "Bulgaria and Smugglers Escalate Their Migrant-Trafficking Battle," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bulgaria-and-smugglers-escalate-their-migrant-trafficking-battle-1474067436>.

⁸ "Balkanska ruta i njeni ogranci," DW, February 18, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/sr/balkanska-ruta-i-njeni-ogranici/a-19054026>.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees" (1943), in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), http://www-leland.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah_arendt_we_refugees.pdf.

¹⁰ Talia Radford, "Refugee Camps Are the 'Cities of Tomorrow', Says Humanitarian-Aid Expert," *Dezeen*, November 23, 2015, <http://www.dezeen.com/2015/11/23/refugee-camps-cities-of-tomorrow-killian-kleinschmidt-interview-humanitarian-aid-expert/>.

¹¹ Lesek Kolakovski, "Pohvala kosmopolitizmu," *Republika*, no. 175 (1996), http://www.yuope.com/zines/republika/arhiva/97/175/175_19.HTM.