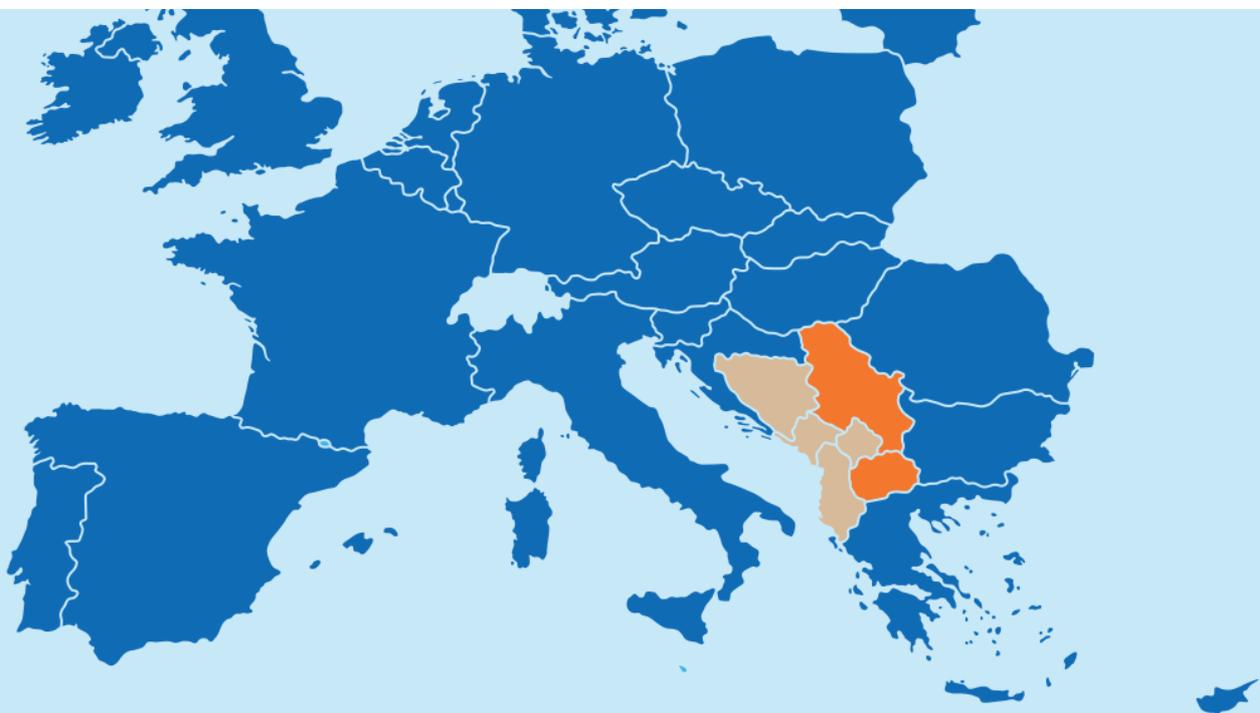


POLICY PAPER

What price do Serbia and Macedonia have to pay to save the EU?

Michal Vít

- **The Balkan route used by migrants coming to Europe was closed in mid-March 2016 with a stricter regime placed for border protection between Greece and Macedonia, Bulgaria and Serbia, and between Serbia and Hungary. In order to limit the flow of migrants on the external border of the EU— in Serbia especially - and to some extent between specific EU states, Serbia and Macedonia were put into an unenviable situation. Even though the route is officially closed for those who do not have guaranteed the right of asylum, the Arbeiter Samariter Bund (ASB) estimates that the number of migrants crossing the border into Serbia still grows daily by about 100 people. These people were detained by the Serbian police and army or, decided to register themselves in one of the Serbian asylum centres; there are also some who decide not to register with the Serbian authorities and to stay in a “grey zone”.**
- **From the Czech and Central European perspective, the closure the border on the Balkans migration path has had broader consequences for the region. In the short-term perspective, the closure of the Balkan route gives more time for the EU to solve this problem and find a joint solution with Turkey to fulfill the March 2016 agreement. Particularly in Serbia and Macedonia the migration issue is beginning to influence domestic politics to the extent that it is perceived as a security threat, and a burden to the administration. Additionally, it has also contributed to shape a specific public and political attitude towards the EU.**



Context of the current cooperation

Current European efforts are focused on finding a solution to deal with the earlier and current inflow of migrants since 2015. Various issues are on the table to offer a new framework, including for example, an altered version of the relocation mechanism. This discussion is connected to a forthcoming reform of the migration and asylum policy, particularly the Dublin system, which is supposed to be endorsed by the Council of the EU until the beginning of the summer 2017¹. The current relocation mechanism has not proved to be working effectively. The major issues occurred in Italy and Greece where congestion of local hotspots slowed down the whole relocation process of, coupled with the growing unwillingness of some EU member states to accept refugees in their countries.

Based on the experience from 2015 and 2016, the EU is preparing a legislative modification of the Dublin system², in order to make it effectively enforceable by states in the Schengen area. The cooperation between the EU and Western Balkan countries remains largely governed by existing tools and mechanisms rather than new ones. In the case of non-urgent financial aid, the possibility remains to use the already existing system for obtaining support from IPA II³ (Instruments for Pre-accession Assistance II). After the agreement with Turkey in March 2016, the flow of migrants using the Balkan route and coming to the Schengen area was markedly limited. The agreement gave more time to the EU and its member states to deal with the effects of the 2015 migration wave and to find a solution which would apply to various groups of migrants. This corresponds to two separate groups: the people fleeing war zones (especially from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq), and therefore satisfying the conditions for asylum, and the refugees from the so-called fragile states. The latter hail from safe countries but where perspectives for a quality life

are meager. Since 2015 and the peak of the migration flows, the bilateral cooperation between the EU member states and Balkan states has significantly intensified. Providing financial support to buy the necessary equipment and creating police missions which are supposed to help with guarding borderlines in Serbia and Macedonia may serve as an example of Hungarian, Slovakian, Austrian, Polish, and Czech initiatives to provide more help to the region⁴. On a different level, the cooperation between the EU, Serbia and Macedonia is mainly centered around the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and the already institutionalized financial cooperation, the terms and conditions of which dictated by the EU. Additionally, the cooperation is being realized through direct financial assistance in several specific cases, such as direct support in running reception centers in Serbia. Another sphere of cooperation is the regional forum MARRI (Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative), which includes all six Western Balkan states and aims to track down smuggling, human trafficking and illegal migration in general⁵. Although, this network was created primarily for monitoring migration from the Western Balkans, it has provided during the current migration crisis highly-qualified information gathering right from the field. The Frontex agency is also forms part of this network.

EU and Bilateral Assistance to Macedonia and Serbia

Bilateral cooperation between Serbia or Macedonia on one side, and EU member states on the other, benefit from more effective communication procedures and information sharing within ministries of interior. It is up to each EU state to decide whether and to what extent they will share the information and use it effectively. Ongoing external aid to Macedonia and Serbia is exercised on various levels and in different institutions. The most significant help is provided

¹ For a detailed analysis of the Dublin system, see: <http://www.ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ECRE-Comments-Dublin-IV.pdf>

² Greece was suspended from the Dublin system in 2011. For details, see: <https://euobserver.com/justice/31681>

³ The IPA II instrument is the main financial tool ensuring pre-accession support to individual candidates for EU membership.

⁴ For example, 20 million CZK were provided for the Macedonian police to purchase new Škoda police cars. The summary of aid is available here: <http://www.romea.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/domaci/cr-posle-na-pomoc-s-migraci-20-mil-bulharsku-10-mil-jordansku> (in Czech).

⁵ For details, see: <http://marri-rc.org.mk/about-us/>

by means of bilateral agreements reached between Macedonia and Serbia with individual EU member states. The police missions themselves are financed by the IOM (International Organization for Migration), not being subject therefore to nation states. The IOM also possesses the most accurate data about the intensity and structure of the migration process. The EU has focused on providing aid to Macedonia and Serbia through direct payments, which are focused on helping the administration of detention camps⁶. These payments, in amounts of millions of Euros, are especially aimed at helping Serbia, where the number of refugees is growing⁷. The Frontex agency which secures the external borders of the Schengen area, is still used as a tool of EU assistance to Serbia and Macedonia. Mobilizing IPA II funds is another way of securing financial aid, but is a demanding process. Funding from IPA II is not flexible enough in order to solve urgent crises. It would be beneficial to introduce special funding scheme that meets with actual needs on spots and has more flexible selection procedure. This is mainly attributable to the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to be an eligible candidate for funding. Using IPA II funding might be slightly problematic because its primary goal is to support the reform of the public administration, which is supposed to lead to better enforceability of the law.

Current situation on borders of Serbia / Bulgaria and Macedonia / Greece

The migration wave was not quelled by the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement. According to journalists who permanently monitor the migration situation, and the representatives of the ASB organization, who oversee the work of the detention centers, the majority of refugees crossing the Serbian and Macedonian border from spring 2016 hailed from Northern Africa and Pakistan. Syrians and Afghans represented a much smaller number but due to their right to asylum have a real prospect of arriving

successfully to their desired final destination, in most cases Germany, Austria or Sweden. As mentioned above, about a hundred new migrants are registered in Serbia every day, according to estimates of the ASB. They either voluntarily register themselves or are forced to do so due to their detention by police forces or army. Those who decide to avoid the registration process are left to wander the streets of Belgrade with no real chance of getting further in the EU.

Since the spring of 2016, important security measures have been taken to strengthen border protection between Serbia and Macedonia. The eastern border, is controlled by patrols at every important crossing with special attention paid to cross-border mountain roads which are not defined as official border checkpoints. According to local witnesses, police patrols are successful in fighting against organized illegal border crossing, a task in which they are assisted by the Czech police forces (jointly with Slovakia, Hungary and Austria) that are sent to Serbia.

Nonetheless, it needs to be said that the illegal crossing is mostly supervised by organized crime, which is rooted in different levels of Serbian and Macedonian state. Even though there is a suspicion of the Serbian police being involved, no conclusive evidence has been published yet. However, it is apparent that people living in the border regions are involved in trafficking.

Considering the high unemployment rate and other problems typically related to border areas, such as the lack of investments and loss of inhabitants, trafficking has become a welcome (if not necessary) source of extra earnings in order to ensure a better living standard. The new detention camp built in Dimitrovgrad (Serbia) on the Bulgarian border may serve as an example of creating new

⁶ For details of the agreement, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/neighbourhood/countries/syria/madad/20160526-ad-western-balkans-ares.pdf>

⁷ For a description of the situation in November 2016, see here: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/survival-gets-tougher-for-migrants-stuck-in-serbia-11-10-2016>

job opportunities together with fighting the migration crisis. The newly established camp provided the region with thirty job opportunities represents, at this regional scale, the biggest investment in terms of fighting unemployment in the last decade. In Serbia, detention camps with a capacity up to 7000 refugees remain half full⁸. Considering that Serbia is the last state bordering the Schengen area, the chances of lowering the number of refugees, on top of the ones who remain in a grey zone in Serbia, are very low.

A similar situation can be found on the border between Macedonia and Greece, where the Czech police mission is stationed since March 2016, with the mission to assist the Macedonian police in guarding the border. The local conditions are specific due to fact that the Idomeni/Gevgelia crossing is the most important transit point between the Mediterranean area and the Balkan peninsula. In spring 2016 15000 migrants accumulated on the Greek border and intended to enter Macedonia. Their main goal was to get to the EU through Serbia. This fact contributed to the need to secure the Greek/Macedonia border before the Serbian boundary. On the Macedonian border in Gevgelja, Czech police mission is stationed to secure this critical spot which is popular among traffickers. Their field of action is extended to be able to travel up to 30 kilometers across the border and to conduct roadside checks of trucks and vans, especially on the important interstate highway connecting Greece with states of the former Yugoslavia. In both Macedonia and Serbia, these patrols are conducted jointly with the local police forces and are positively welcomed, as highlighted by local Czech representatives and high-level visits by officials⁹. In 2016, members of the Czech Parliament, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior visited Macedonia, which constitutes a significant difference

if compared to the number of state visits of other EU countries.

Migration effect on the institutional and political stability in Macedonia and Serbia

Problems, caused by migration in these two Balkan countries, cannot be viewed from the perspective of their inefficient fight against trafficking. The enhanced attention the region received shone a light on the real political and social situation in these states and it has also shown the level of cooperation amongst the EU members. Both countries are dealing with major structural problems, such as demographic stagnation, which is reflected by low or negative yearly population growth rates (in Macedonia the rate has decreased to 0.12 %, in Serbia -0,4 %) ¹⁰. Other problems affecting the countries mentioned above are, for instance: the continuous migration of their inhabitants to the EU, the reflux of people living in economically weak regions, the high corruption rate or the negative progress in promoting the freedom of speech¹¹.

In addition, there is in both countries a problem with the gradual concentration of power in hands of current Prime Ministers. Even though the situation in Macedonia is definitely worse than in Serbia, both states exhibit the same symptoms when it comes to centralization of the political power and its interference into the economic sector. Actions focus on the political elimination of opponents by picturing them not as ideological rivals but as enemies of the state.

⁸ Estimates are available here: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/survival-gets-tougher-for-migrants-stuck-in-serbia-11-10-2016>, and here: http://migration.iom.int/docs/WEEKLY_Flows_Compilation_No28_3_November_2016.pdf

⁹ Among other things, a visit of the Minister of the Interior Milan Chovanec in March 2016: http://www.mzv.cz/skopje/cz/obchod_a_ekonomika/ministr_vnitr_a_ceske_republiky_milan.html (in Czech)

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of these figures, see: <http://www.europeum.org/articles/detail/789/zapadni-balkan-na->

[ceste-do-eu-status-quo-uprchlikum-navzdory](#) (in Czech). For further information about the average birth rate in Macedonia and Serbia, see: <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/macedonia-population/>, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/serbia-population/>

¹¹ The unsatisfactory evaluation of Macedonia from the Reporters Without Borders group may serve as an example: <https://rsf.org/en/macedonia>

A typical example in this regard may be represented by PM Gruevski's reaction to the accusations of tapping his political opponents. In this case, he portrayed them as foreign agents from intelligent services and enemies of the state¹². In both cases, Prime Ministers seem to be blinking at the activities of trafficking and even to be tolerating it.

The Issue of the migration crisis has so far only marginally been politicized in Serbian politics. This approach is slowly changing in Serbia, where migrants are accumulating with no perspectives for their future in or outside of the country. It is fair to remind that migrants are not perceived to be culprits of 'petty thefts' and therefore do not require intensified security measures taken against them. The greatest danger is that politicians may connect the migration issue to European integration, or eventually as a means of gaining wide public support against integration efforts.¹³ In this regard, there are two trends in Serbia. The first concerns the growing influence of the nationalist opposition to PM Vučić and the Serbian refusal to join the EU. Here, the migrants will possibly be used as an example of the EU's incapability to solve its own problems, and thereby attempting therefore to export them beyond its borders – nominally, to Serbia. The second thread exists in terms of political calculi. Precisely, it is about taking over the rhetoric, which is picturing the migrants as the EU problem solely and putting Serbia into position of country solving the issue for the EU,. In this case, the consequences of these actions would have a deep impact on the reform efforts in terms of EU integration not only in the Serbian society, but as well on the nature of political interaction at the international level.

A decade after the eastern enlargement of the EU, the EU's enlargement strategy has reached a rather interesting point. The EU is forced to support current political leaders who are attempting to assess their authoritative power (Serbia) or that already assessed it as in the Macedonian case. The migration crisis has the risks of not providing the Western Balkan states with a specific political motivation

and the perspective of further partnership with the EU. Paradoxically, the current status quo is convenient for all parts involved, since Macedonia and Serbia have taken precautions to limit the illegal migration and at the same time the organized crime is profiting from the migration crisis because of trafficking. The EU contributes to particular states and, ultimately, the states of the Central Europe are helping to stabilize the situation.

What can be done by the Czech Republic?

Leaving the region of the Western Balkan on the sidelines is not desirable for the EU or the Czech Republic, a point proved once again by the migration crises. Other actors such as Russia or China are prepared to substitute the EU's lack of interest in the Western Balkans very quickly. Obviously, the Western Balkans' integration needs to be viewed in terms of strengthening institutional stability and democratization, although reality shows the necessity of having pragmatic channels for mutual communication.

From the Czech point of view, there are two important matters. The first one is to continue to provide concrete assistance, for example by dispatching police missions which are useful in obtain direct information from the ground and to continue to demonstrate our readiness to help. The second important task is to advocate the idea of enlargement and to keep this topic high on the EU agenda, which can be regarded as a long-term and multifaceted challenge. Not only is it necessary to ensure the domestic political support for the agenda, but also to maintain this topic alive at the EU level by using any appropriate means available. Pressure on the highest political level then needs to be complemented with wide-scale cooperation of the state administration and civil society.

¹² One of the many incidents is described here: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-special-prosecution-suspects-former-pm-gruevski-06-10-2016>

¹³ According to various sources dealing with the issue of EU integration in Serbia and Macedonia.

České vize pro Evropu, evropské vize pro Česko
Czech Visions for Europe, European Visions for the Czechs

Although the integration process is not currently enjoying attention and interest from all the involved parties, for the Czech Republic and the EU itself, it is more than just important to engage in joint cooperation efforts especially in relation to the migration crisis. A EU's disinterest in this region could lead to negative consequences.

For example, when dealing with shared problems, the role of the EU would be significantly smaller because of the Western Balkans' careless attitude or because the EU would be missing reliable partners. Cooperation on the bilateral level, which is currently heading towards smaller but easier approachable results, is showing an appropriate type of cooperation and communication between states of the Western Balkans and the EU (the case of the Macedonia and Serbia has proven it).

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