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MIGRATION PANORAMA

The Western Balkans migratory route: perspectives and persisting challenges

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In the context of the ongoing refugee and migration crisis the new focus of the EPC's Migration and Diversity (EMD) Programme is to generate and develop policy recommendations, provide decision-makers and public opinion with expertise and independent information, as well as to promote a positive and constructive dialogue on the multidimensional consequences of Europe's migration crisis.

Therefore, in the following years, the EMD Programme will focus on the numerous policy processes launched since the beginning of the crisis while providing qualitative analysis and recommending common European solutions to the EU's most important existential test. We will do so by:

Creating a platform for discussion

Through a series of events with relevant decision makers, analysts, journalists, academics and civil society representatives, as well as the media, the EPC is bringing stakeholders together to have an open debate about the possible ways out of this crisis and suggest pathways to solutions.

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Articles in this publication represent the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the EPC.

Introduction

After years of 'enlargement fatigue' and increasing marginalisation on the European Union's agenda, the Western Balkans returned to the centre of the EU's attention last year. This renewed relevance came about as an unprecedented number of refugees crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece and transited through the region to reach Central Europe. Given their geographic location and the fragility of the EU's cooperation with Turkey, countries along the Western Balkans route have in fact become crucial partners for the effective management of migratory flows towards the EU. EU-Western Balkans cooperation in this area may also affect further progress on enlargement, as migration-related capacity-building efforts spill-over into other areas of governance and EU engagement with the region is sustained. Although the pressure on the countries along the Western Balkans route has decreased substantially since an agreement with Turkey was signed in March 2016, fears of a renewed influx has kept the Western Balkans on the EU agenda.

A look back at the events leading up to the EU-Turkey Statement serves as a reminder of the sheer magnitude of the refugee influx, and the disorder it provoked. The number of irregular arrivals in Greece peaked in October 2015, with 211,663 people in that month alone according to the UNHCR. In the course of 2015, a total of around 900,000 asylum seekers travelled onward from Greece to the rest of the EU. The vast majority of these travelled to Austria and Germany by transiting through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYROM), Serbia and on to Hungary. When Hungary closed its borders, the flow was diverted through Croatia and Slovenia. The influx strained already overstretched capacities, both at the borders and in reception centres, to the breaking point. Relations between Western Balkan states and also between EU member states were tested, particularly as uncoordinated unilateral national responses prevailed at first. Hungary's decision to insulate itself from the influx by fencing off its border with Serbia and Croatia is a case in point. However, the sustained migratory pressure on Austria and Germany led to diplomatic efforts to coordinate measures in order to manage the flow more effectively.

A series of extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council meetings were held in September 2015 to address the growing humanitarian crisis. These meetings led to the creation of refugee 'hotspots' in Greece and Italy with a view to registering all new arrivals. Another measure was the controversial EU relocation scheme designed to transfer 160,000 of those new arrivals to other member states. This approach met intense opposition from several Central and Eastern European states, which resisted accepting relocated refugees. On 8 October 2015, a High-Level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route was held in Luxembourg. The resulting declaration pledged to mobilise increased development support for host governments and host communities, to support affected transit countries and to engage with countries of origin.

By 15 October 2015, the EU had negotiated a joint action plan with Turkey to strengthen cooperation in order to prevent irregular migration flows to the EU. A Commission-led summit involving leaders from the most affected countries along the migratory route took place on 25 October 2015, resulting in a seventeen-point plan of action which sought to tackle smugglers and traffickers along the route and improve communication between states.

The crisis continued into the new year, with the number of people arriving in Greece in January and February 2016 dwarfing the equivalent figures for 2015. On 24 February 2016, Austria hosted a conference in Vienna to discuss migration management with the foreign and interior ministers of Western Balkan states. Greece was not invited to the conference, causing a diplomatic spat between the two countries, with Athens recalling its ambassador to Austria the day after the meeting. The conference agreed on entry-capping measures that would essentially trap migrants in Greece. Protests erupted at the Greek-fYROM border on 29 February 2016, in an increasingly tense situation that looked as if it could turn into an immense humanitarian crisis. However, the pressure eased following the adoption of the so-called EU-Turkey Statement on 18 March 2016, according to which all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey onto the Greek islands would be returned to Turkey. Slovenia announced that it would close its borders the following day, with Croatia, Serbia and fYROM following suit soon afterwards.

The drop in numbers transiting through the Western Balkans route did not, however, signal the end of concerns with regard to that route. Since the purported closure of the Western Balkans route, it has been reported that 50,000 people still have managed to reach Germany. The situation remains extremely delicate.

The Bratislava informal summit of 16 September 2016 reiterated the EU's full commitment to implementing the EU-Turkey Statement as well as continuing its support to the countries of the Western Balkans. These twin objectives have become the mainstay of EU policy *vis-à-vis* the Western Balkans route. The EU has also provided funding to transit countries along the Western Balkan route. Funding is allocated through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance where applicable, but also through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis. For example, the Commission has provided humanitarian aid amounting to over €22.5 million to the Western Balkans since the beginning of the crisis, notably to Serbia and fYROM.

On 24 September 2016, Austria organised another summit on migration in which leaders from the EU and the Western Balkans expressed their desire for increased external border control to ensure that the route does not re-open. The meeting also discussed the possibility of expanding Frontex's mission in the region but no firm agreement was reached on this point. More recently, the Salzburg Forum Ministerial Conference, held on 3-4 November 2016, also discussed migration along the Western Balkans route. Its joint declaration welcomed the progress made but issued a word of caution that the route could re-open.

Given the possibility of a re-opening of the route and the consequent importance of drawing lessons from last year's developments, this collection of articles sheds light on the current state of affairs and the long-term impact of the influx on the region. It thereby attempts to improve our understanding of whether the region is now better prepared for a potential second wave of irregular migrants.

This issue of the Migration Panorama includes contributions from six different authors. Milica Mancic and Kristine Anderson of the International Rescue Committee, highlight humanitarian considerations and the effect of EU policies on governance in the region. They consider the role of civil society to be crucial for an improvement of conditions for refugees, migrants and citizens in

the Western Balkans. Vladimir Petronijević from Grupa 484, a Serbian NGO, focuses on the situation in Serbia – a key transit country at the heart of the Western Balkan route. He analyses Serbia's management of the refugee influx at the humanitarian and institutional levels, highlighting the need to shift from short-term crisis response measures to long-term legislative reforms. Raphaela Engel of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Defence explains Austria's special role in managing irregular migration flows in the region, stressing the importance of close cooperation with Balkan states. MEP Tanja Fajon's contribution takes a look at the impact of events on EU-Western Balkan relations and potential implications for EU enlargement. She stipulates that a coherent EU policy is a prerequisite for strong and successful EU-Western Balkans cooperation. Finally, the EPC's Matteo Bonomi provides a comprehensive analysis of the political dynamics resulting from the refugee influx, in particular regarding EU enlargement. He calls for the EU to actively frame the migration crisis within its enlargement policy instead of handling these two issues separately.

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Human rights and migration management in the Balkans: lessons learned, impact on EU accession and the way forward

In the past year, the unprecedented migration crisis in the Western Balkans has posed uncomfortable political and humanitarian dilemmas for the European Union and regional candidate states hosting refugees. Yet the political attention given to borders — and the role of Balkan countries in maintaining their integrity — is an opportunity to leverage the processes of EU accession to improve humanitarian conditions for refugees and migrants and bring about better governance. To accomplish this, however, the EU must first learn from the policy mistakes that have endangered refugees and migrants.

From a Balkans perspective, the EU's reactive political stance to the crisis and conflicting messages from European officials point to a lack of common policies on asylum in the Union to jointly address the humanitarian crisis faced by Europe. Whilst some EU member states committed to relocating commendable quotas of refugees, many balked at the initial European Commission Agenda on Migration put forward in May 2015 and argued against the joint action that was initially proposed. This lack of solidarity is further demonstrated by the low level of member state participation in the relocation scheme to date. Southern EU member states and the Balkans are largely left to manage the movement of refugees and migrants, when a full commitment to the relocation plan would have allowed the safe and secure arrival of refugees in final destination countries.

Furthermore, EU migration policies — particularly the controversial EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 — had the effect of exacerbating poor governance and corruption in some Balkan countries, and exploited their lenient human rights practices to seal off borders with the outlying EU countries. In fact, the EU-Turkey Statement has not only failed to stop migration to Europe, but has placed refugees and migrants at greater risk of exploitation and trafficking. The EU-Turkey Statement invigorated the already lucrative black market in the Balkans — the centre of European illicit arms trade and drug trafficking — as illicit rings moved into people-smuggling. In the five months after the borders were declared closed, more than 24,000 people made their way through the Western Balkans route. This trend continues today, with at least 15,000 people that are hosted across Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary at the time of writing. At the same time, the EU and other international funding for the humanitarian response in Balkan countries has not increased in line with the deterioration of the context during this period. This places a substantial burden on countries such as Serbia, which currently hosts more than 6,000 people as of October, with few institutional and financial resources to cope. This increases the pressure on Balkan countries that foot the bill for the refugee crisis while balancing public dissatisfaction with an anaemic economy and unemployment rates as high as 30%.

Yet at the same time, there have been some surprising and positive reactions to the migration crisis within countries such as Serbia where, in order to provide a humanitarian response, we have seen strengthened cooperation between the state and civil society. States along the route also received international support in the form of funds and institutional capacity-building, allowing for the strengthening of existing social welfare systems to cope with the current and future crises.

This presents an opportunity for EU policies to leverage this crisis for the greater good of both refugees and migrants as well as citizens in Balkan countries. The migration crisis is an opportunity to utilise the instruments of EU enlargement to implement the *acquis communautaire* and to further strengthen Balkan civil society, building on its role as a critical partner to the state in managing and providing for a humanitarian response. Chapters 23 and 24 of the *acquis*, which deal with Justice and Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, can serve as an instrument to simultaneously improve the humanitarian situation of the refugees and the civic rights of citizens of Western Balkan nations. Apart from dealing with the most obvious issues related to migration — border control and transnational police cooperation — these chapters offer an equally important opportunity to upgrade and rigorously apply asylum laws and enact the package of reforms necessary to combat trafficking, an issue that has haunted the region since the Balkan wars. This is also an opportunity to revisit the lacking integration policies of Balkan countries, who are potential partners in sharing the burden of the crisis.

Fortunately, Southeast Europe can count on the cooperation of a robust civil society. If the EU exerts its influence on Western Balkan governments to include civil society as a critical partner in the negotiations, this can help to ensure the development of sound laws and regulations that uphold the rights of citizens and migrants, and prevent exposure to exploitation and violence. In this sense, the *process* of EU enlargement is of greater value to the EU and to the Western Balkans than the *outcome* of accession.

Current EU migration policies do not favour the wellbeing of Balkan states or of the refugees and migrants. The Balkans' cooperation with these policies has strained, and will continue to strain the resources of states in the region, disgruntle host communities, fuel the already lucrative black market for smugglers, and push people toward riskier routes to Western Europe. The EU's response to the migration crisis can potentially set a precedent of humanitarian leadership that might be emulated by candidate states in the Western Balkans. To accomplish this, the EU must first correct the inhumane policies of the last year by enacting procedures that promote rights and protect the vulnerable.

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Asylum and migration in Serbia: from *ad-hoc* responses to alignment with EU standards

Even before the start of the migration crisis in mid-2015, Serbia had seen an increase in the number of people expressing their intention to seek international protection. In 2013, 5,065 people applied for asylum, and this number tripled already in 2014, when 16,500 people sought asylum in Serbia. These migratory movements preceded the refugee and migration crisis of 2015, which is without precedent in the recent history of Europe. In Serbia alone, 577,995 asylum seekers were registered. As a result of the closure of borders, the number of people who expressed the intention of or expressed an interest in seeking asylum in the Republic of Serbia dropped significantly. By 30 September 2016, 8,594 people expressed an intention to seek asylum, mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Pakistan, but only 540 have actually filed an asylum application.

In this context, it is necessary to examine the asylum and migration system in the Republic of Serbia at two levels: the humanitarian level, which was initiated with the increased influx of migrants and refugees in Serbia, and the legislative level. The second, which could be characterised as a reform, concerns the establishment of a functioning asylum system and the management of migration in line with the strategic orientation and international commitments of Serbia.

The current Asylum Act (hereinafter AA) was adopted in 2007 and first implemented in April 2008. In 2008, a whole series of bylaws were adopted. Although amendments to the legislative framework in the field of asylum are among the main measures in all key strategic documents, from 2008 until today, there have been no changes in the regulations governing this area, even though the implementation of solutions under the current law have caused a number of problems. The current version of the "Draft law on asylum and temporary protection" is a significant improvement in relation to the current law, even though some of the methodological and procedural solutions remain controversial.

The draft law includes several positive changes, notably the linguistic and conceptual improvements of the text that eliminate contradictions and inconsistencies and make certain clarifications; the introduction of higher standards in terms of the rights and protection of particularly vulnerable categories of asylum seekers; changes in the asylum procedure through the introduction of special procedures; the adjustment of deadlines for certain actions within an asylum procedure; and changes to the rights available to people who enjoy some form of protection. The draft law also progressively introduces gender considerations in asylum procedures, thus aligning its provisions with the Council of Europe's Convention on the prevention of violence against women, which Serbia has committed itself to uphold. Furthermore, changes that introduce guaranteed asylum procedures for and acceptance of minors, with special attention given to unaccompanied minors, take up considerable space.

It is very important to note that the refugee and migration crisis was treated as a short-term situation and that the asylum and migration legislative and strategic frameworks were not used as the overall framework for dealing with this challenge.

Several factors brought Serbia to the stage where it was necessary to consider the cause and effect relationship between certain aspects of migration policy and the asylum system (the so-called migration-asylum nexus). These include the expansion of migrant smuggling, the implementation of border control measures by neighbouring countries in order to deter irregular movements, pressure on the asylum system and an influx of migrants in search of better economic conditions.

Overcoming the identified shortcomings will be necessary in order to continue the process of European Union accession, particularly after the opening of negotiations on Chapter 24, which also deals with asylum policy. In this process, Serbia will be required to bring current regulations in the area of asylum fully in line with EU legal standards, and unequivocally demonstrate that the standards imposed by the EU are fully implemented, and not just symbolically adopted. EU financial support is the prerequisite for the successful implementation of these planned reforms.

However, at the moment, the most pressing challenge currently facing Serbia is to provide shelters and satisfy the basic humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants.

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The impact of migration on the Western Balkans from an Austrian perspective

Austria has very strong cultural, political and economic ties to the Western Balkans. Not only the shared history, but also the geographic proximity of the Balkans to Austria plays an essential role. Austria is also one of the leading investors in the region; the trade volume with South East Europe was €5 billion in 2015, more than twice that of the year 2000. Austria thus remains very concerned about the political and security situation in the region.

The Balkans route running north through the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYROM) and Serbia was the main transit route for refugees heading to the EU in 2015 but at the same time, the Balkans also continued to be a source of economic migrants to Central Europe. Since Greece took no effective measures to stop the flow of migrants entering the Balkans, Slovenia and Hungary closed their borders, which strained their already overstretched institutional capacities to the breaking point. The domino effect of closing the borders also caused bilateral tensions in the region, most notably between Serbia and Croatia.

In order to prevent this situation from having a potentially negative impact on overall regional stability, at the end of February 2016, the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as the Minister of Interior met with their counterparts from Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia, as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, fYROM, Montenegro and Serbia. The meeting in Vienna aimed at identifying an inclusive common position and pushed for a final closure of the Balkan route, providing additional political support for such a course. Among the measures pointed out in the common declaration "Managing Migration Together", is an agreement to set standards for what kind of information migrants would need to provide in order to be registered, as well as measures on how to support the Balkan states in protecting their borders. Since then Austria, among other countries attending this format, provides police personnel to support the identification and registration process at the border of fYROM with Greece. Furthermore, the Austrian Ministry of Defence donated night-vision devices supporting national efforts to effectively control the border.

In March, following the closure of the Western Balkan route and the entry into force of the EU-Turkey Statement on 20 March, the number of migrants arriving in Greece dropped to 26,460 – less than half the figure recorded in February. Nonetheless, Austria's engagement in pushing forward common initiatives in Central Europe and the Balkans shows an unbroken commitment to support the countries of the Western Balkans. Only recently, on 24 September, Chancellor Kern invited the heads of government of Albania, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Croatia, FYROM, Serbia, Slovenia, Hungary, the President of the European Council, the European Commissioner for Migration as well as the Interior Minister of Romania to a summit in Vienna about migration along the Balkan route.

Furthermore, the Austrian presidency of the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC) has taken the initiative to explore measures to better manage migration crises and mitigate their effects. This also includes ways of how to most effectively support partner countries in the

Western Balkans, fully in line and coordinated with existing projects, programmes and current activities of the EU including the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA).

Together with Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia and the Czech Republic, Austria explores further ways in which non EU-countries in areas affected by migration flows directed towards Europe can be best supported by CSDP or other instruments, beyond the scope of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA). One possible scenario involves supporting fYROM in case of a sudden increase in migratory flows (e.g. border surveillance and prevention of uncontrolled border crossings, providing training and technical assistance as well as capacity building for 'hotspots', etc.).

It should be noted in this context that the Austrian government was sceptical about the EU-Turkey agreement from the very beginning. It is perceived as a necessary measure to ease the migratory pressure but is not seen as a long-term solution. The Austrian Minister of Defence, who took a firm stance in the national debate about migration, stated in early November that he did not think the EU's migration deal with Turkey would hold for much longer and that the EU must prepare to strengthen its external borders. An essential precondition for restoring effective control of the EU's external borders is close cooperation with our partners in the Balkans.

We have to acknowledge that the EU and its member states were insufficiently prepared during the increasing influx of refugees starting from 2015. For Austria, it is crucial to ensure, politically and in practice, that the Western Balkan route of irregular migration is closed for good. It will continue to support the Western Balkan countries (e.g. fYROM) in this endeavour. Even though political interest in the region increased in the context of the migration crisis, it has not had a direct impact on the accession process itself. Austria has always highlighted that it strongly supports the EU accession process of all Western Balkans countries and is therefore keen to assure that an influx of refugees would have no destabilising effects on the region. It will do so on a bilateral, regional (e.g. in the framework of the CEDC) and European level. At the same time, the Austrian government fully understands that the primary challenges lie in addressing the root causes of migration.

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The EU and the Western Balkans: in need of a strategic partnership

The European Union has always been a European project, but its vision surpassed the structure of its original founders a long time ago. Nowadays, the EU includes 28 countries and the Western Balkans remain a region with the highest potential of joining the EU family.

The enlargement process in the Western Balkans is ongoing. The most recent development in the process was the adoption of an annual Enlargement Package by the European Commission, last presented in autumn 2016. The next package will be presented in spring 2018, covering the entire previous year, 2017. Commissioner Johannes Hahn reported about important steps being made by each country; however, he warned that reforms are proceeding at various speeds. Countries have made significant progress, yet much remains to be done when it comes to deep structural issues.

Albania has made steady progress towards fulfilling all of the five key priorities necessary for the opening of accession negotiations. It has accepted constitutional amendments which will lead to a comprehensive judicial reform. The Commission thus recommended that member states consider opening accession negotiations with Albania on the condition of a successful continuation of the implementation of judicial reform.

Serbia opened two additional chapters, which means four are now open in total. The Commission insists on progress in the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo as well as in the area of rule of law, and considers them as key conditions setting the pace of EU accession negotiations.

The progress of Bosnia and Herzegovina in its reform process paved the way for the European Council to ask the Commission for an *avis* on the country's membership application. Two new chapters have been opened in the accession negotiations with Montenegro. It continues to improve its efforts on the path towards the EU.

The migration crisis clearly had an impact on the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans, mainly because it reminded us of the strategic importance of the region. Positioned in the EU's backyard, the countries of the Western Balkans became the main route for refugees wishing to enter the EU. The latter cannot afford not to cooperate with the Western Balkan countries.

The EU sees the closure of the Western Balkans route as a success; the countries involved are viewed as credible partners and as part of the solution, not the problem. It continues to support them and future cooperation on this issue may influence accession talks as well. However, the latest progress in EU accession talks is not directly linked with the migration crisis and there should not be any direct conditionality between migration and the accession process as these two appear to be separate issues.

The resurgence of the migration crisis looms behind the strained relations between the EU and Turkey, which has been committing striking human rights violations after the failed military

coup. If the EU-Turkey Statement falls through, the Western Balkan countries will bear the brunt of the consequences.

At the moment, closed EU borders have resulted in full occupancy of reception centres in Serbia. Although there is currently no influx of migrants coming into the country, many economic migrants are forced to stay in the country for a lengthy period of time. Originally from Afghanistan and Pakistan, they do not fulfil the necessary conditions to seek asylum in the EU. Western Balkan media have reported that some stay in military barracks, since reception centres and camps are overcrowded. NGOs are banned from distributing food outside of the camps, which causes fights between hungry people.

Macedonia is also affected by the migration crisis, which burdens its asylum and migration system. The main source of tension is the closed border with Greece, where migrants are waiting to continue their travel on the Western Balkans route.

Commissioner Hahn has warned about Western Balkans countries turning into 'parking lots' for migrants. But in order to prevent that, EU member states must agree on a mechanism that would allow the distribution of accommodation for refugees proportionally between member states and help those countries where migrants are forced to stay.

There is an urgent need for a joint contingency plan for the EU and the Western Balkan countries which should include rapid response and long-term oriented activities with an aim to handle the migration crisis properly and successfully. Long-term action should include the installation of proper infrastructure and recruiting qualified personnel, both of which would require financial resources provided by the EU, at least partially. It needs to be emphasised that the Western Balkans countries have only had to deal with the migration crisis due to the EU's failure to manage it elsewhere. Therefore, the EU should commit to full cooperation and generous help for the Western Balkans. In return, Western Balkans countries must continue to deal with migrants in such a way as to respect human rights and the rule of law.

Cooperation between the EU and countries from the Western Balkans should be stronger than ever in order to counter the insecure political climate that has plagued the EU after Brexit. But in order for this cooperation to bear fruit, the EU first has to agree on a coherent policy on migration, which it failed to do when the crisis was at its peak.

Tanja Fajon
Member of the European Parliament

The political context of migration in the Balkans: European disunity in the shadow of EU enlargement policy

Between the summer of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, the collapse of the EU's external borders in the Aegean Sea has brought attention back to the Balkans, highlighting the region's enduring geostrategic importance. In the absence of common solutions – with the EU member states divided between those calling for solidarity and those advocating for a complete border closure – the EU's internal problems spilled over onto the Balkans, adding to pre-existing bilateral tensions dating back to the 1990s. At the same time, the EU's enlargement policy has played an indirect role in helping to manage the crisis, by keeping candidate countries along the route largely motivated to cooperate. Nevertheless, this has also had serious actual and potential costs for the credibility of EU conditionality and the process of democratisation of candidates in the Western Balkans. It is therefore important that the EU and its member states develop a coherent approach to their migration and asylum policy that could work in synergy with the enlargement strategy, rather than risk to undermine it.

While it is difficult to make a clear link between the response to the refugee crisis and actual progress in Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's (fYROM) EU integration process, governments of both countries saw the crisis as an opportunity to try to raise their leverage with the EU and strengthen their domestic position by presenting themselves as champions of regional stability. At the same time, the credibility of EU conditionality was seriously harmed in the eyes of the (already) increasingly EU-sceptic local populations. In fact, EU pressure on Skopje and Belgrade to remain aligned with core European liberal values and even be 'more European' than some EU member states driven by national egoisms and xenophobic sentiments was somehow perceived as another example of the international community applying double standards to the Balkans. Thus, while Serbia and fYROM's actions fostered some sense of national pride domestically, they also fed frustration and resentment towards the EU's requests.

Hungary's unilateral decision to close its borders, in mid-September 2015, and the following Serbian-Croatian quarrel are possibly the starkest examples of the perceived hypocrisy of EU demands towards Serbia. In fact, the closure immediately led to an escalation of mutual accusations and a rapid rise in bilateral tensions between Belgrade and Budapest and then Zagreb, Belgrade and Budapest. Facing the unexpected daily arrival of tens of thousands of migrants, Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović, who at the time was also dealing with forthcoming parliamentary elections, reacted by blocking cargo traffic and denying access to vehicles registered in Serbia, in open violation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Serbia and the EU. The Serbian counter-move came fast, as Belgrade immediately blocked access for all Croatian goods. Inflammatory rhetoric rapidly spread in both countries, culminating in an eight-day 'trade war' that ended only by the resolute joint intervention of the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, on 25 September 2015.

Bilateral tensions intensified also between Greece and fYROM, on top of their long-lasting name dispute. With both countries facing serious internal socio-economic and political problems, the

refugee crisis provided an opportunity for both governments to play a blame game against each other: Skopje (supported by the Visegrád group) accused Athens of allowing large numbers of migrants to pass unhindered through its territory, while Athens accused fYROM's security forces of excessive use of violence to prevent migrants from leaving Greece.

Despite these initial tensions between neighbouring countries, with the arrival of autumn, a greater degree of cooperation took place along the Balkan route. Brussels' intervention in the Serbian-Croatian dispute thus marked a turning point towards a cross-border approach in managing the passage of hundreds of thousands of migrants. Within this context, Belgrade and Skopje abstained from politicising the migrant issue for nationalistic purposes and remained largely collaborative, at least partly driven by the possibility of scoring some points in their EU accession path.

Yet this concerted policy of 'waving through' lasted only until Austria refrained from its liberal asylum policy in February 2016. Through a domino effect, the Austrian measure led to further restrictions in the Balkans, creating new tensions on the Greek-fYROM border. All these events created additional pressure on the EU to find an agreement with Turkey, which was concluded on 18 March and outsourced the EU's problems and responsibilities further east.

The final closure of the Balkan route rests on the delicate EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, with the former asking much more openly for concessions from the EU, starting with concrete progress on visa liberalisation. The failed coup attempt in Turkey on 15 July 2016 further deepened concerns about the state of the rule of law and human rights in the country. Under the present conditions, the EU could further endanger the credibility of its enlargement policy by giving in to Turkish demands, or risk the re-emergence of the Balkan route if it does not. This scenario would seriously limit EU leverage in asking for key reforms in the Balkans, especially in the delicate field of the rule of law.

EU disunity is seriously affecting the credibility of its external action and enlargement policy, highlighting the urgency of restoring consensus among the member states on how to deal with mixed flows of refugees and migrants. While the EU seems to have been at least so far able to stick to its 'strict but fair' conditionality and keep accession candidate countries in the Balkans cooperative, this position could become less and less sustainable in the future. Hence, rather than insisting on the separation between cooperation with the Balkans in the field of irregular migration and progress in enlargement policy, the EU should openly frame the migration crisis within its enlargement policy. This presents an opportunity to strengthen the integration of the Balkans into a common EU border security framework. Proceeding towards the integration of the Balkans into Frontex operational structures could be a first step in this direction.

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MISSION STATEMENT

The European Policy Centre (EPC) is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

Migration Panorama

The refugee crisis is increasingly being acknowledged as a pivotal moment for the European integration project. The unprecedented number of people asking for international protection in EU countries has been the source of tension, uncertainty, disunity, but also of innovative policy responses arising in record time.

Thus, the EU seems lost between the ambition to find new solutions and the determination to implement measures to which member states have not fully subscribed.

In this context, new voices need to be heard. New perspectives on the various dimensions of the crisis must be revealed. This is precisely what the European Policy Centre's Migration and Diversity Programme aims to achieve with this new publication entitled 'Migration Panorama'.

More specifically, our intention is to build a framework in which stakeholders can express their views and consolidate the debate around crucial issues emerging from the refugee crisis. Indeed, the goal is to put fresh and original perspectives into the spotlight and provide a platform for external authors with different profiles (academics, decision-makers, journalists, researchers, etc.) by enabling them to focus on the same topic but from different angles.

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