
Macedonia in the 2015 Refugee Crisis

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Abstract. The refugee flows, which in the recent years have acquired considerable dimension and complexity due to a number of conflicts –particularly, but not exclusively, active and vicious in the Middle East and in some African countries– affected the Western Balkans with unexpected intensity during 2015. The Republic of Macedonia, itself a host country of refugees in a not so recent past, became one of the key transit countries for refugees fleeing from the war in Syria who chose as their point of destination countries in the European Union which had declared themselves ready to accept them. This paper will provide: some reliable figures to allow a rigorous assessment of the magnitude of the challenges faced by Macedonia during the so-called "refugee crisis", and will use these figures as the departure point for an enumeration of the national and international actors who intervened in this process, helping to deal with the humanitarian crisis generated by the flow of refugees; a definition of the policy priorities and the legal framework on the basis of which the Macedonian Government conducted itself during this crisis; and an evaluation of Macedonia's success rate in this situation and the consequences this crisis has generated for the country, in terms of its internal stability and its international image.

Keywords: European Union, Refugees, Immigration, Macedonia, Middle East

1. Introduction and background

The refugee flows, which in the recent years have acquired an unexpected dimension due to a number of conflicts –particularly, but not exclusively, active and vicious in the Middle East and in some African countries–, now affect virtually all countries of the world. A few of them (like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Somalia) are affected in their capacity as generators of emigration and refugees; many others (like Germany, Austria, and the Nordic countries, but also most other European Union member states) in their capacity as host countries of the refugee and migration flows; and some (like Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia, or Macedonia) primarily in their capacity as transit countries.

Despite its very short existence, the Republic of Macedonia was already once forced to become a host country of refugees: it was during the 1999 conflict in Kosovo, when this former Yugoslav Republic had to provide humanitarian aid and safe refuge to more than 400,000 ethnic Albanians fleeing the violence in the then Serbian province. NATO air strikes against the Milošević regime, starting on 24 March 1999, were aimed at putting an end to the violence in Kosovo and to making Serbian authorities accept the terms of the Rambouillet Peace Plan. But the strikes provoked escalating violence on the ground, which in turn generated a large refugee outflow that included organized expulsions of Kosovars to Albania and Macedonia. As a result, nearly a quarter of the entire population of the territory fled or were expelled, many of them to Macedonia, in the very short period of eleven weeks. The refugee inflow not only generated a major humanitarian crisis, in great part solved by the solidarity of ethnic Albanian families in Macedonia, but also raised fundamental issues of national security seriously affecting the delicate ethnic balance of the country (Drezov, 2001). The overall estimation is that the government of Macedonia generally accepted the flow of refugees and that despite the challenge they posed, their basic needs were met: there were no serious epidemics, no deaths on a large scale, and the mortality rate among refugees was much below the generally accepted threshold for emergencies (UNHCR EPAU, 2000). However, it is also assumed that some of the tensions

generated by this episode were replicated two years later, in the well-known outburst of violence of the spring of 2001, which put Macedonia on the verge of an extended armed conflict and could only be resolved by the peace deal brokered by the international community and concluded between the Slavo-macedonian and the Albano-macedonian parties known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement (Flores Juberías, 2002/2003).

However, Macedonia's position in the current refugee crisis in the Balkans is entirely different. Starting in October 2014, throughout 2015, and until the first quarter of 2016, Macedonia turned into a transit country, especially for refugees fleeing from the war in Syria and Iraq, who chose as their point of destination countries in the European Union. This came as a direct consequence of the geographical position of Macedonia, as a part of the "Western Balkan route" (See Figures 1 and 2) that linked the above mentioned scenarios of conflict with the safe havens in Western and Northern Europe through Turkey and Greece in the first place, and Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia or Hungary in their last steps (Mandić, 2017). This confronted Macedonia with the numerous and complex challenges deriving from the need to provide state protection, appropriate treatment and care, and swift passage to their points of destination to an unprecedented flow of refugees transiting through its territory, which by the end of the year were already numbering several hundred thousand.

This complex scenario caught the Republic of Macedonia in an already complex internal situation, which the refugee crisis certainly aggravated. For a long time, Macedonia had been considered a relative success story in the Western Balkan region: no major political confrontations nor inter-institutional disputes, peaceful interethnic relations –only abruptly interrupted, and rapidly reconciled, in 2001–, fairly successful state-building process, slow but steady economic progress, and a promising route towards EU and NATO integration rapidly became the trademarks of this small Balkan country, which in December 2005 received EU candidacy status and by 2008 was already fulfilling the criteria for entering NATO (Flores Juberías & Atanaskova, 2012). However, following the highly controversial 2014 elections, Macedonia entered a severe political crisis, in which no major ingredient was missing: disputed

electoral results, illegal wiretapping of high government officials, massive street demonstrations, repeated accusations of corruption and cronyism, the permanent meddling of EU, US and Russian diplomats on the spot and –on top of it all– even a new outburst of violence (Vankovska, 2015). The events of May and June 2015 were a reminder that Macedonia had the potential to become a fertile ground for politically instigated violence and ethno-centric mobilization, while the country's high unemployment rate –around a quarter of its labor force remains unemployed– offers additional reasons for social unrest

Within this context, this paper will start by providing some reliable figures to allow a rigorous assessment of the magnitude of the challenges faced by the Macedonian Government during the so-called "refugee crisis"; secondly, it will describe the national and international actors which became engaged in the process of dealing with the humanitarian crisis generated by the flow of refugees; thirdly, it will define the policy priorities on the basis of which the Macedonian Government conducted itself during this crisis and the legal framework under which these policies operated; and finally, will evaluate Macedonia's success rate in this situation and the consequences this crisis has generated for the country, in terms of its internal stability and its international image.

2. The dimensión of the refugee crisis: some relevant figures

The refugee crisis of 2015 initiated in the summer and became increasingly serious in the last four months of that year, gradually losing intensity throughout the first months of 2016.

Prior to 2015, irregular immigration was a relatively minor problem for Macedonia: the number of detected persons had been 682 people in 2012 (European Commission, 2014); a figure which increased by 66% in 2013 with a total number of 1,132; and reached 1,750 in 2014, but which, in any case, featured rather manageable figures (European Commission, 2015).

FIGURE 1: MAIN ROUTES TOWARDS EU COUNTRIES IN THE 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS



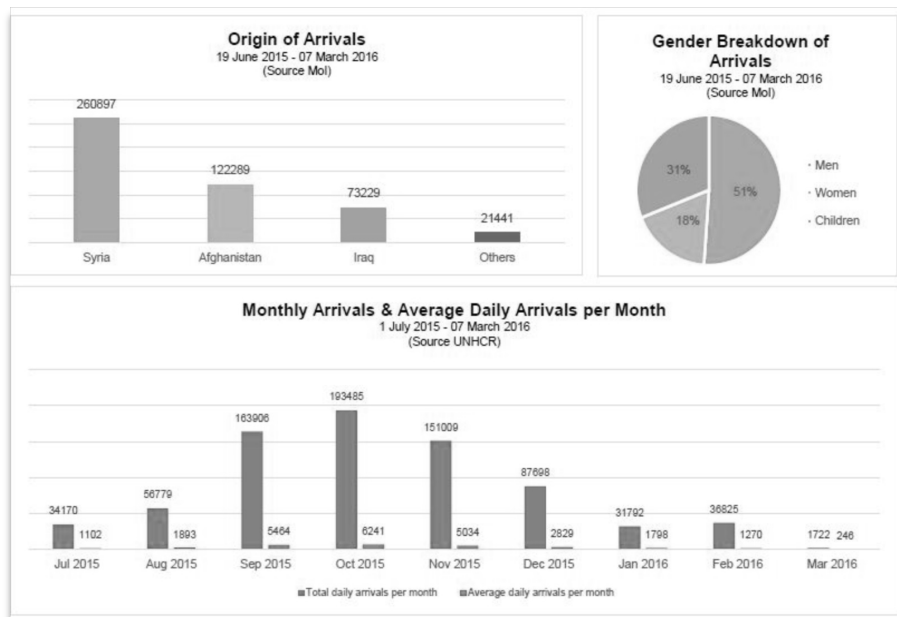
(Source: Tash y Nudelman, 2016)

FIGURE 2: THE BALKAN ROUTE, PRE-MARCH 2016



(Source: Mandić, 2016)

FIGURE 3: REFUGEE ARRIVALS TO MACEDONIA (JUNE 2015 - MARCH 2016)



(Source: UNHCR, 2016 b)

However, everything changed in 2015 (See Figure 3). The largest flow of refugees in Macedonia took place during the months of September, October and November 2015: during this period, the number of new arrivals reached figures above 150,000 refugees per month, more than 5,000 new arrivals per day (European Commission, 2015). Starting in 2016, however, those figures dropped dramatically to around 1,500 new refugees per day, and even to lower figures in the following months of 2016. At the end of March 2016, just 1,223 refugees and migrants were registered to remain in the country: 1,033 in the Tabanovce Reception Center, 135 in Vinojug, 43 in the Vizbegovo Reception Center for Asylum Seekers, and 12 in the JRS-run Safe House. By January 2017 –the latest available data–, there were approximately 200 refugees in Macedonia, mostly citizens from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, 2017), of which 84 were settled in Tabanovce and 69 in Vinojug (UNHCR, 2017 a, 2017 b).

According to the Macedonian Ministry of Interior and the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), between June 2015 and March 2016, the number of refugees entering Macedonian territory and declaring their intention to apply for asylum in EU member States reached the figure of 477,856. Of these, 260,897 (55%) declared themselves to be Syrians, 122,289 (26%) Afghans, 73,329 (15%) Iraqis, and the remaining 21,441 (4%) represented other nationalities such as Iranians, Palestinians, Pakistanis, Somalis, Congolese and Bangladeshi. Women and children –of which no less than 18,349 (4%) were registered as unaccompanied– made up 49% of the refugee flow. As of 1 January 2016, only 80,176 of them were in need of international protection, mostly nationals of Syria (38,752), Afghanistan (25,222) and Iraq (16,199). Only 80 have applied for actual asylum within Macedonia, while most of them choose to apply for asylum in Austria, Germany, or Sweden. By 31 March 2016 only 2 persons had been accepted as refugees in Macedonia, both unaccompanied children, one from Iraq and one from Syria (UNHCR, 2017 a, 2017 b).

It should be noted that the overall number of migrants transiting through Macedonia –estimated at 800.000 between June 2015 and March 2016–, represents about one third of the overall population of the country; a figure which it itself may well describe the unprecedented burden this crisis posed for the Macedonian administrative structures.

3. The management of the refugee crisis: Macedonian institutions, NGOs and international organizations

The massive flow of migrants and refugees towards Macedonia's southern border and into Macedonian territory generated security and humanitarian problems which in the first place fell within the scope of competence of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior's special Unit for Border Affairs and Migration, responsible for the security aspects and management of Macedonian borders. A specialized unit within the Department for Serious and Organized Crime dealt with the fight against human trafficking and people smuggling; and a Crisis Management Center was established already

in 2015 in order to manage the flow of refugees and to coordinate infrastructural needs of the transit centers. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy became responsible for migrants' and refugees' access to services and for their socioeconomic integration while in Macedonian territory. It also managed children without parents or legal guardians, asylum seekers and humanitarian food and non-food items. The Ministry of Interior –and especially its Section for Asylum– managed security, identification and documentation processes, while the Ministry of Health was charged with providing suitable health care to individuals. For that purpose, a National Coordinator for the Immigrant Crisis was created within the Macedonian Government, while the Ombudsman Office also took part in the protection coordination.

Humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees was also facilitated by a number of non-governmental and international organizations, most of them working on the spot. Specifically, shelter was provided by the UNHCR and Habitat for Humanity; food and water by the UNHCR, UNICEF, the Red Cross, La Strada, and Caritas; primary medical interventions by the Red Cross, the World Health Organization (WHO), the UNHCR and the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund); protection by UNHCR, La Strada, Terre des Hommes, and the German GIZ (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), among others. UNICEF and La Strada cared specifically about displaced children, and the IOM (International Organization for Migrations) had a limited role in monitoring and collection of overall data, including pushbacks. Local NGOs (like Legis, the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association or the Macedonian Helsinki Committee), volunteers, and activists also flocked to the refugee camps providing humanitarian food and other kinds of assistance, and legal aid for documentation, registration and asylum procedures. They were also active in preventing human rights violations, and in guaranteeing good living conditions in the camps (UNHCR, 2015).

Finally, following its meeting in Belgrade, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) decided to deploy around 400 representatives of the mission of the European Frontex border forces on the Macedonian-Greek border in December 2015. Assisting in the securing Macedonia's borders were also representatives of

border control units from several EU countries –namely Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia– plus Serbia, who deployed their police officers in support of Macedonian police (Vecer, 2015; Lokalno, 2015).

4. The existing (and the new) legal framework

In order to provide the necessary legal framework for the provision of humanitarian aid to refugees in Macedonian territory, on 16 January 2015 the National Assembly adopted the Resolution on Migration Policy Strategy and Action Plan for 2015-2020, based on the previous one of 2009-2014 (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2009, 2015 a). Later on, an emergency response plan in the event of continued flow was developed; and in November 2015 a Standard Operating Procedure was adopted, establishing a comprehensive approach towards unaccompanied foreign minors. In July 2016, additional standard operating procedures on vulnerable categories of migrants were also adopted.

Also, in order to deal with the increased number of requests for asylum in the Republic of Macedonia, in June 2015, the National Assembly passed the Law of Amending and Addition of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection. This legal reform enabled refugees to communicate their intention to seek asylum to a police officer within 72 hours from their arrival to the country, and granted temporarily free movement and use of the public transportation system. These legal changes were intended to significantly reduce the chances for organized criminal groups specialized in migrant smuggling to obtain benefit from the situation, as well as to reduce the risk of accidents (European Commission, 2015). Macedonia is party to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The amendments also established that an application made by a person from a safe third country would be considered as manifestly unfounded, which appears to be incompatible with the Asylum Procedures Directive (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia, 2017). On one hand, these changes brought improvements in the area of access to the state territory and asylum procedures as well as in the

conditions for detention of people seeking international protection (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2016 a). On the other hand, the Law created restrictions on family reunification by requiring that the principle of family reunification only be exercised three years after obtaining refugee status, which is incompatible with the Family Reunification Directive.

The Law on Foreigners was amended in December 2015 to address the complexity and duration of procedures for obtaining work permits and resident's permits for employment or self-employment (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2015 b). A single procedure was introduced to apply for residence permit for work (European Commission, 2016 a). This amendment also was intended to align Macedonian legislation with the *aquis* on the right to family reunification, the status of third-country nationals who are long-term residents, conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange and return of illegally staying third-country nationals (European Commission, 2016 a). In 2014, there had been 4,219 temporary residence permits issued.

As of today, the country still needs to conclude readmission agreements with a number of countries of origin of irregular migration while upholding the non-*refoulement* policy towards asylum seekers. However, in 2014, 1,213 people were returned to the country because of a readmission agreement with the EU, and from January 2015 to January 2016, 15,496 migrants were returned to the territory of Greece due to falsified certificates, documents or because of the nationality-based restrictions imposed along the Western Balkan route. In 2015, 1,832 people were returned to the country, mainly from EU Member States and assisted voluntary return procedures have been carried out for 23 migrants.

Despite the legislation progress, and although the country has the necessary institutions and procedures in place to handle asylum claims, the problem of the lack of or inadequate implementation of legal provisions still exists. Therefore, a number of national and international actors, including the European Commission and UNHCR, believe that "the state still does not meet international standards for the protection of refugees and can not be considered a safe third country" (European Council, 2013) and have even advised

neighboring states to refrain from returning or sending asylum seekers in Macedonia until the improvements in legislation and practice do not meet the international standards.

5. The position and the policies of the Macedonian government

Macedonia's position in relation to the refugee crisis, stated in an endless series of official statements and interviews with Western media like CNN, BBC, Bild, and the Wall Street Journal, mostly carried out by MFA Nikola Poposki (2016), can be synthesized primarily in the following five points:

- 1.– That the numbers of migrants entering Macedonia should be "determined by the numbers of those that can be accepted in Western European nations".
- 2.– That the "open borders" concept that was present during the last years, has its limits: "It is clear that the absorption capacities of migrants in mainly receiving EU member states such as Germany, Austria, Sweden and others has reached a certain threshold where it cannot continue in the next year with the same pace".
- 3.– That "there has to be a distinction between those fleeing a conflict, to whom we have to provide a safe haven, and those that are simply going to Europe in order to find a better job. This is a legitimate reason too, but it has been clear over the years that none of the European countries is capable of absorbing millions of migrants that might simply come for economic reasons",
- 4.– That "there is a decision to stop illegal migration and to make sure that there is a registration at the exit from Greece on those that can be eligible asylum seekers", with the purpose of making sure that "there is 100% registration of legitimate asylum seekers that are allowed to continue their route and transit through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and eventually arrive in Germany".

5.– And, finally, that though Macedonia's interest is not to close the border with Greece – "The last thing we like to see is a big mass happening across the border in Greece"–, this may become the only possible solution if countries up north like Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria decided not to open their own borders.

As a consequence of such a set of priorities, measures taken by the Macedonian Government in relation to the refugee crisis could basically be classified in the following five categories:

1.– Measures adopted in order to guarantee the protection of national borders and for the prevention of illegal entries. In order to discourage illegal entries, control the flow of migrants and channel them towards legal entry and registration checkpoints, a security fence was erected and/or reinforced on sections of the Greek-Macedonian border suspected of being vulnerable to illegal crossing, which increased the number of people intercepted while attempting at an illegal border crossing. Furthermore, on March 9, 2016 Macedonia closed its border with Greece completely, in response to Austria, Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia announcing further restrictions on who would be allowed to cross their borders. 240 cases of damage to the border security fence were documented.

2.– Measures adopted in order to promote cooperation with other European countries, especially in order to receive bilateral assistance from EU member states regarding border surveillance equipment and secondment of border guards to assist Macedonian border police with patrols, registration and identification. In response to these requests, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria decided to second border guards and equipment, having them deployed on a rotational basis together with Macedonian security forces at the border region. Coordination and cooperation with the Greek police authorities was also established at different levels. The Government of Macedonia welcomed the decision of early December 2015 to deploy Frontex border guards at Greek–Macedonian border.

3.– Measures adopted in order to provide humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees in Macedonian soil. With this purpose, two Transit Relief Centers were created: one in Vinojug (on the southern border with Greece, not far from the main border crossing of Gevgelija), with an official capacity of 1,500 people, and another one in Tabanovce (close to the northern border with Serbia, near Kumanovo) with capacity of 500 people. Besides these two locations, some refugees were also hosted in the Asylum Center in Vizbegovo, the Safe House, and the Center for Foreigners in Gazi Baba, all locations in or around Skopje (European Commission, 2015). These centers were adapted to provide temporary transit relief capacity for short-term stay for 2,000 people (as compared with Romania who at that point had the capacity to host just 1.200 refugees, Bulgaria, 5.100, and Albania, just 300). According to the European Commission report at the beginning of the migration crisis, the situation in the transit centers was poor, but improved over time (European Commission, 2016 a). However, these facilities were not suited for extended stay. In close cooperation with UNHCR, the Red Cross, and other relevant international organizations, the Macedonian Ministry of Health managed to provide services to prevent diseases, as well as health treatment to refugees hosted at the transit centers. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy also undertook concrete measures including the provision and distribution of food and water, clothing, blankets and other necessities to refugees. The Center for Social Work designated guardians (adult refugees) to unaccompanied minors.

4.– Measures adopted in order to help refugees cross through Macedonian territory towards their destination of choice. The Macedonian Government provided migrants with a document granting them a 72-hour stay in the country before either formally seeking asylum or leaving the country, and also provided access to public transport and medical help within that 72-hour time frame.

5.– Measures adopted in order to fight against organized crime, specifically mafias active in human trafficking and documents counterfeiting. The Macedonian Government acted here in

response to a documented increase in the circulation of counterfeit documents, mostly false Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan passports and identity cards, but also counterfeit Frontex and Greek registration certificates. As a result of Macedonian authorities strengthening these screening procedures, only in January 2016, 2,979 cases of counterfeit documents were detected by the Macedonian police.

6. The phases of the refugee crisis

From the Macedonian perspective, the 2015 refugee crisis could somehow be divided into three different periods or phases. The first period was dominated by the unexpected, uncontrolled, and illegal border and territory crossing of the country by refugees and migrants arriving to Macedonia's southern borders from the Middle East and through the territories of Turkey and Greece; the second period was that of systematically organized transiting of the refugees and migrants through Macedonian territory across a South-North corridor, under the supervision of Macedonian authorities and international organizations; and the last period was that of closing Macedonian and European borders and the retention of refugees for extended periods in designated points of concentration. Hence, the context in which the events were developing was significantly changing from one period to another and was marked by the following developments.

6.1 The phase of illegal crossing

The registration of migrants by Macedonian authorities began only in June 2015. Since then and until the end of 2015, 388,233 refugees who passed through Macedonian territory were registered (International Organization for Migration, 2015), while from the beginning of 2016 until March that year (when, as a result of the agreement between EU and Turkey of 18 March 2016, the borders of the Balkan route were officially closed) 89,623 additional refugees were registered (Republic of Macedonia, Ministry of Interior, 2016).

Considering the time that passed from the beginning of the crisis until the start of the registration process, it can be assumed that a large numbers of refugees crossed Macedonia unregistered and, consequently, that the real number of refugees and migrants arriving in the EU between 2014 and 2016 was much higher than the official data shows, probably exceeding the number of 1 million people.

During 2014 and 2015, 5,267 migrants and 5,740 refugees were missing or found dead. International Organization of Migration reported that year 2016 keeps the record number of 7,189 migrants and refugees dead or missing in the world during the crisis (Telegraf.mk, 2016). According to the Minister of Internal Affairs, 40 migrants lost their lives in 2014. For the 2015 and 2016 there is no official data, but, according to the European Commission report, the number of deaths was 24 people, who were killed by trains in 2015 (European Commission, 2015; Aljazeera America, 2015).

6.2 *The phase of organized crossing*

On 19 August 2015, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia for the first time adopted a decision declaring a state of crisis on the southern and northern borders of the state as a result of the massive flow of refugees in the country. This first declaration was intended to last for 30 days (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2015 c), but on 18 September 2015, the state of crisis was extended until 15 June 2016 (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2015 d). By successive decisions of the National Assembly, the state of crisis was extended twice again: on 28 March 2016 until 30 December 2016 (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2016 b), and on 13 October 2016 until 30 June 2017 (Sobranie na Republika Makedonija, 2016 c). The objective of the declaration of the state of crisis and its extensions was to secure "continuity of the execution of tasks by the army and security forces of the Ministry of Interior in an attempt to guard and protect the state border" (MIA, 2016).

In November 2015, a first wire fence was constructed on the border with Greece after police officers were injured in a violent attempt of the migrants to enter Macedonia (Vest, 2015). The second line of the

fence was constructed in February 2016 on the same border, while in March of the same year a three-meter high wire fence was constructed on the border between Macedonia and Serbia as a response to the increased number of illegal border crossings from Serbia into Macedonian territory after closing the borders of the Balkan route (Tasev, 2017).

In September 2015, the transit of refugees was organized in the Vinojug and Tabanovce transit camps. The camps were set up away from populated areas, along the train tracks, and close to the borders with Greece and with Serbia. Camps expanded daily, and transit was conducted in an organized manner, with the registration of refugees in Gevgelija and direct transport with an emergency line of trains of Macedonian Railways. After closing the borders on 9 March 2016, around 1,400 refugees remained in the country (UNHCR, 2016), most of them in these two camps with an established closed regime, which means that the refugees were not allowed to leave the camp. This retention in Vinojug lasted almost nine months when as a result of significant pressure from NGOs and the Ombudsman, the refugees were allowed to visit the towns, always accompanied by representatives of the Red Cross.

6.3 The phase of border closure

The boundary between Greece and Macedonia soon became one very conflictive area. In order to close the so-called "Western Balkan route", Macedonia followed the decision of its northern neighbors, closing its own border. Greece was then forced to accept a deployment of EU border guards to keep people from arriving to its own refugee camp in Eidomeni.

This closure, however, was gradual. In December 2015, the Government of Macedonia adopted a decision that only nationals of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan may cross the state border, and in February 2016 extended this limitation banning refugees from Afghanistan too. In early March 2016, the government decided to close the borders completely to any person without legal residence in the country, automatically categorizing them as "migrants" because of

the decisions undertaken by other countries on the Balkan route and according to the agreement between the EU and Turkey (Collett, 2016; European Commission, 2016 b)

These actions decreased the numbers of new arrivals, at the cost of exposing migrants to security and humanitarian threats such as smugglers, criminal local gangs and additional police violence due to clashes or attempts for irregular entries. Macedonian police, in cooperation with police forces of Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, uncovered the smuggling of thousands of refugees and migrants. In 2016, progressively restrictive policies culminated with the end of the wave through approach via designated crossing points and a drastic reduction in the number of new arrivals. At the same time, it resulted in some 1,400 refugees and migrants remaining in the country as of 9 March 2016. In September 2016, their number decreased to less than 200 as a result of continuing their way to Serbia.

Many refugees entered and still enter illegally in the country, falling victim to smugglers and acts of hatred. The smuggling attempts started to increase from 2014 by around 44% comparing with the previous year (European Commission, 2014). From January to August 2016, 84 cases of attempts to smuggle a total number of 1,480 migrants were detected. Criminal charges were submitted against 72 people, including 12 foreign nationals for smuggling of migrants. Law enforcement bodies tried to be more proactive in preventing and arresting people smugglers. Approximately 100 victims were citizens of Syria, Afghanistan and Morocco. Many migrants were found to be victims of physical attacks resulting in injuries, and also robbed, or tricked by people offering them bogus transport (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2017).

7. The financial cost of the refugee crisis

According to the Macedonian Vice Premier for EU Integration (Besimi, 2016), Macedonia received about € 20 million in support for the refugee crisis in 2015, of which € 10.5 million came from the EU, while € 5.3 were received from different international organizations

for humanitarian assistance and € 5.2 million for equipment and other equipment directly in the field. In 2016, around € 40 million in assistance was expected, of which € 10 million would be received as a special support from the EU for hosting refugees. An additional € 50 million from IPA 1 and 2 EU funds for the period 2007-2020 will be dedicated to integrated border management, border control, and asylum policy. This will be very useful in this current crisis but they are also systematic solutions for Macedonia becoming a part of the Schengen, with an integrated control system and full implementation of asylum policy as in the EU countries.

In 2016, the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Europe covering the period from January to December 2016 was adopted. From the reports of UNHCR of the snapshots of November and August 2016 it can be seen that Macedonia in November received funding totaling \$ 20,575,461, which covered 79% of its total requirement of \$ 26,014,080, while the snapshots of August showed that the funding level was \$ 18,605,788, which was 72% of the total requested amount of \$ 26,014,080. Governments of different countries and private donors contributed this financing (UNHCR, 2016 c, d).

According to the International Organization of Migration, the donations from the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Governments would be applied towards achieving better management of the public health impact of population mobility in the receiving countries including Macedonia, as well as providing information on the medical conditions of migrants. The Governments of Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and The Netherlands financed an assisted voluntary return program. These were aimed at providing an orderly and humane return of refugees to their own homes in circumstances in which such return does not threaten their lives, including airport reception, transportation to final destination, counseling and referral to assistance services, installation of reintegration grants, housing support, educational reinsertion, vocational trainings, employment facilitation and micro-business set up. The caseload consists of failed asylum seekers, vulnerable returnees (those with medical condition, unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking, etc.), both individuals and families.

8. The EU assesment of the role of Macedonia in the refugee crisis

An overall evaluation of Macedonia's response to the refugee crisis was provided by the European Commission's 2015 and 2016 Progress Reports. The Commission's opinion in these two Reports concludes that Macedonian authorities took positive, but perhaps insufficient, measures to deal with humanitarian consequences of the refugee crisis. With the difference that in 2015 authorities were largely overwhelmed by the escalating numbers of refugees, while in 2016, when humanitarian tension decreased, Macedonian authorities could better manage the humanitarian consequences of the crisis and at the same time increase the pressure on illegal smuggling activities on its northern and southern borders.

The recommendations of the Commission are summarized in three points, two of which remain unchanged in both Reports. The first one is the need to ensure effective border management and step up action against people smuggling and human trafficking as a high priority. The second is that the country should strengthen and continue capacity building regarding the management of mixed migration flows, while in the report of 2015 the emphasis is made on early identification on the vulnerable groups, in difference to the 2016 report where the asylum system stood out. And the third recommendation differs in the terms that in the 2015 Report, it is focused on the adoption and implementation of the new anti-terrorism strategy and action plan, with special attention being paid to measures preventing radicalization, while in the 2016 Report the emphasis is made on adequate accommodation and special consideration to vulnerable categories, like unaccompanied minors, women with children (European Commission, 2015, 2016).

More specifically, the 2016 EC Report on Macedonia acknowledged that the humanitarian situation is now stabilized, and that sufficient inter-agency bodies have been established to deal with future emergencies, and that reception centers for irregular migrants now meet basic standards. But it also underlined a number of negative aspects, among them that (1) a lack of clarity persists over the division of powers, coordination and responsibilities among them; (2) reliable data on the scope and structure of migration flows is largely

missing; (3) screening, identification and registration of migrants, does not meet EU standards yet; (4) there is still insufficient institutional capacity and human resources in the Crisis Management Centre; (5) reception centers for irregular migrants are not suitable yet for the accommodation of vulnerable categories or persons, nor for long term stays, and lack of security remains a problem due to the persistence of organized criminal groups; (6) the need to conclude readmission agreements with a number of countries of origin of irregular migration –especially with Turkey– while upholding the non-*refoulement* policy towards asylum seekers still has to be addressed; and (7) effective border management and stepped up action against people smuggling and human trafficking should remain a high priority.

Additionally, the EC Report largely criticized the existing Macedonian regulation of asylum on the grounds that important shortcomings existed within it. Application made by a person from a safe third country is considered as manifestly unfounded, which is incompatible with the Asylum Procedures Directive; the principle of family reunification may only be exercised three years after obtaining refugee status, which amounts to an excessively long period of time; the asylum procedure in the quality of decision-making remains inadequate; the capacity to evaluate the applications on merit is weak, since the Section for Asylum is not fully staffed and cannot cope with asylum applications in a timely manner; sufficient translation capacities are lacking; the decision making process in asylum procedures is often considered to not be transparent; court decisions are often not taken on the basis of a thorough examination of the merits and rarely contain a clear motivation; calling on state security is used as the most common grounds for refusal of applications for international protection; there have been reported cases of *refoulement* at the borders targeting an unidentified number of migrants; and there are limited protection-sensitive screening mechanisms to identify and refer appropriately those who may be in need of protection. All in all, a sufficient budget is needed to facilitate the effective integration of refugees (Chudoska Blazhevskaja, 2016).

9. Conclusions

In general terms, the position of transit countries is by and large less complex than that of the countries of destination, and obviously less dramatic than that of the countries of origin of refugees. Unlike the latter, transit countries are not plagued by violent armed conflicts, and unlike the former they are not bound to provide long-term assistance, and to guarantee social integration for large number of refugees. But this does not mean their position is devoid of a certain complexity.

To begin with, transit countries are bound to deal with a problem which is essentially alien to them, since –by definition– they are not the ones provoking the flow of refugees, nor are they the final point of destination where refugees plan to stay. Despite this, transit countries are still expected to build up temporary but costly infrastructure to deal with refugee flows, when many of them simply lack that infrastructure, nor have the economic ability to pay for it, and to keep it active for periods of time which they cannot foresee, much less determine. Transit countries are compelled either to coordinate their policies with those of the countries of destination, or to become dependent on the decisions taken by them, which severely limits their capacity to decide on their own policies, and places them in a clearly subordinate position. To make matters worse, transit countries are usually put under the spotlight of international media for being a point of entry or passage of refugee flows, not to mention because of the responsibilities they have to face as the first safe point of destination of such refugees. Finally, transit countries often run the risk of suffering an unfair undervaluation by international public opinion of the challenges faced, as a consequence of the perception that their responsibilities in assisting refugees is somehow less demanding than that of countries of destination.

The position of Macedonia in the 2015 refugee crisis featured all the characteristics of a transit country, and therefore the country suffered all the above mentioned consequences. The country was forced –largely as a result of its geographical position– to handle a complex and entirely unprecedented situation which it had certainly not provoked, nor helped create; was required to build up costly infrastructure and forced to mobilize its own police and military

forces to their full capacity; had no choice but to act in accordance with the decisions of countries farther up the migration route, upon which it had very little influence, if any; and was required to conduct itself in full compliance of EU values and standards. Moreover, Macedonia was forced to face extended criticisms of how its Government handled the situation by the international media and by several European governments –especially Greece– which repeatedly held the country responsible for the dramatic situation of refugees – even of those still in EU territory. This portrayal of Macedonia as a hostile country for refugees, selfishly denying entry to a host of people at serious risk, resulted in significant damage to its international image.

However, the truth is that on occasion of the 2015 refugee crisis the Republic of Macedonia made a logistical effort of enormous magnitude –both in absolute terms and, especially, in relative terms– in order to adequately channel the flow of refugees who sought to cross its territory towards the host countries of their choice, providing them with humanitarian aid, transportation, security and documentation. Additionally, it introduced relevant changes to the existing legal framework for treatment of refugees, asylum seekers and people in need of international protection. Also notable were the efforts of the Government of Macedonia to increase the available capacities and to improve the existing infrastructure for the treatment of these individuals. And, on top of that, having been trusted with the task of keeping the buffer zone toward EU countries, the Republic of Macedonia became one of the key elements in geo-politics and according to the words of the country's President Gjorje Ivanov (2016), ended up "defending EU from itself".

This notwithstanding, and against a background where most of the legislation has become harmonized with international standards, it must still be noted the existence of contradictions between Macedonian domestic legislation and international standards on issues like grounds for refusal, family reunion, safe third country, etc.; as well as some deficiencies in the facilities designed for the accommodation of refugees. Deficiencies and shortcomings which one may expect may well be resolved in a less demanding national and international scenario as the one experienced in the Balkan peninsula during 2015.

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