The EU's Externalisation of Migration Management Undermines Stabilisation in the Western Balkans

by Maria Saide Liperi

The EU's externalisation of migration and border management to the Western Balkans stands in sharp contrast with its long-standing goal of a stabilisation of the region pursued in the framework of the EU's enlargement process.

The Western Balkans are not only structurally unable to absorb flows of thousands of people, but the management of mixed migration flows, also implying reception and asylum processing responsibilities for host governments, is also creating fertile ground for inter-state tensions. They have been (and continue to be) for EU member states, so why should this be any different for the Western Balkans?

The process of externalisation of EU borders to the region began before the so called "refugee crisis" hit the headlines in 2015. Migration management has been a prominent issue in EU-Western Balkans relations since the early 2000s through the EU's use of the quid-pro-quo strategy involving visa facilitation and readmission agreements as well as the enlargement process, which in some cases ran in parallel.

Visa facilitation and readmission agreements between the EU and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (ByH), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM),[1] Montenegro and Serbia entered into force between 2006–2008, offering speeded up visa procedures for citizens of those countries in exchange for stepped up migration cooperation, primarily aiming to curb irregular migration to the EU.[2]

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[1] The country's official name at the time of the agreement. On 12 June 2018 Greece and FYROM signed an agreement on the new name of Republic of North Macedonia and in February 2019 the country officially changed name.

[2] Florian Trauner and Imke Kruse, "EC Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements: Implementing a New EU Security Approach in the Neighbourhood", in *CEPS Working Documents*, No. 290 (April 2008), https://www.ceps.eu/node/1475.

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With the unfolding of the so called "refugee crisis" in Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean route became the focus of the challenge.[3] Firstly, EU member states undertook actions to reduce the flow, both as a bloc and bilaterally as single countries.

The EU-Turkey Statement, signed in March 2016, and the progressive strengthening of EU border controls neighbouring the Western Balkans led to a drastic drop in the number of migrants and refugees arriving in EU through this route.

Secondly, the Union pursued a more effective border control regime in the region. Thanks to a reinforced mandate agreement for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA), signed in October 2016, and following draft agreements with countries of the region, the Agency was able to provide assistance and carry out operational activities there.

While the number of migrants crossing the region was strongly reduced, these interventions resulted in the accumulation of migrants in certain territories and an undue pressure on domestic systems in certain states. At the end of 2017, the main route simply moved to Northern Albania, Montenegro and ByH. Yet, the strict controls at the Croatian border turned ByH into a bottleneck.

Bosnian authorities registered 21,163 migrants illegally entering the country in 2018.[4] In addition, those already in the country were staying longer, keeping up the pressure at crossing points, where the same people have repeatedly attempted to cross the border.[5]

According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), only a small number of migrants entering ByH desire to stay in the country and instead seek to reach Western EU countries, which are attractive not only for economic opportunities, but also for existing family and social ties.[6]

Moreover, most of the countries of the region were unprepared to deal with refugees due to a structural lack of facilities and resources.[7] In the case of ByH, considering a total population of 3.5 million and an economy that is still recovering from the civil war, the state is unable to deliver necessary assistance and services for new or existing migrants in the country.

[3] UNHCR Bureau for Europe, *Desperate Journeys. Refugees and Migrants Entering and Crossing Europe via the Mediterranean and Western Balkans Routes*, February 2017, https://www.unhcr.org/58b449f54.

[4] Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Holds Its 156th Session. Report on Migration Adopted*, 6 November 2018, http://www.vijeceministara.gov.ba/saopstenja/sjednice/saopstenja_sa_sjednica/default.aspx?id=29395.

[5] Bodo Weber, *The EU-Turkey Refugee Deal and the Not Quite Closed Balkan Route*, Sarajevo, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe, June 2017, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13436.pdf.

[6] International Organization for Migration, *Analysis: Flow Monitoring Surveys. Bosnia and Herzegovina*, September 2018, http://migration.iom.int/docs/Flow_Monitoring_Surveys_Analysis_BiH_2018.pdf.

[7] Neža Kogovšek Šalamon, "Asylum Systems in the Western Balkan Countries: Current Issues", in *International Migration*, Vol. 54, No. 6 (December 2016), p. 151-163.

Above all, ByH is missing a system able to host migrants and EU funding cannot fill the structural gaps since not only money, but manpower and technical support are needed to address inadequacies in migration management.[8]

From a regional perspective, the EU's externalisation of migration management is also adding stress and tensions between states in a region where unresolved territorial disputes and a still delicate balance between different forces continue to pose a threat.

This is especially true in the case of ByH, which has a central government with three presidents, two entities and one independent district, and where three ethnic groups coexist. The leaders of the Republika Srpska have renewed calls for independence from ByH and an eventual union with Serbia, for instance, demonstrating the ongoing potential for instability.

In this context, security issues are closely intertwined with nationalist sentiments. On the one hand, the argument of "security'" is strictly linked to border control and, consequently, to border demarcation and territorial disputes; on the other, "security" can be used to level accusations and delegitimise local authorities.

In May 2018, Željka Cvijanović, the former Prime Minister and current President of the autonomous Republika Srpska, voiced concern for the way the central government was handling migratory flows, describing its efforts to patrol the southern-eastern border and prevent new entries as inadequate.[9]

Moreover, the arrival of many Muslim migrants has spurred divisive rhetoric and conspiracy theories about a supposed "Islamisation" of ByH propagated by the far-right parties of the two non-Muslim ethnic groups (Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats), in turn contributing to regional tensions.[10]

Looking at the broader regional context, in May last year, Bosnian Minister of Security, Dragan Mektić, denounced the behaviour of neighbouring countries on migration. He accused Serbia of not doing enough to control flows across the border and particularly for agreeing to a visa liberalisation agreement with Iran – later abolished in October 2018.[11]

Good neighbourly relations are essential to ensure peace and stability in the region. Migratory pressures risk exacerbating divisions, both regionally and domestically, and if left unchecked may even ignite renewed bouts of ethnic and confessional violence.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Mladen Lakić, "Bosnian Serbs Want Border Closed to Migrants", in *Balkan Insight*, 14 May 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/14/bosnian-serbs-call-for-closing-borders-to-migrants-05-14-2018.

[10] Una Hajdari and Michael Colborne, "Why Ethnic Nationalism Still Rules Bosnia, and Why It Could Get Worse", in *The Nation*, 12 October 2018, https://www.thenation.com/?p=294388.

[11] Mladen Lakić and Gjergj Erebara, "'New Balkan Route' for Migrants, Refugees Causes Alarm", in *Balkan Insight*, 4 June 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/06/04/region-on-alert-as-migrants-open-new-balkan-route-06-03-2018.

As noted by the European Commission, "leaders of the region must take full ownership and lead by example. They must avoid and condemn any statements or actions which would fuel inter-ethnic tension and actively counter nationalist narratives".[12]

The EU's enlargement process is indeed linked to conditionalities, chief among which stand regional cooperation and reconciliation, indispensable ingredients to overcome the legacies of conflict and place the Western Balkans on a more sustainable path.

In February 2018, the European Commission reaffirmed the firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans. Yet, the EU's parallel choices vis-à-vis migration risk undermining this goal. Contrary to stabilisation, these policies are fomenting instability, while absorbing resources otherwise intended to strengthen democratic institutions and social policies across the Western Balkans.

In practice, the EU is undermining its Balkan enlargement process, and this at a time when not only Russia but also China is increasing its focus on the region, through aid, trade and investment flows.[13]

The EU should focus its initiatives on enhancing regional asylum and migration systems through financial and structural support. However, given that the Balkans should not (and cannot) play the role of migration buffer states, more effort has to be directed towards developing safe and legal migration and asylum channels from the region (and further afield) into the EU.

Instead of prioritising a so-called "migration emergency", the EU should support the stabilisation process and the resolution of unsolved disputes through careful and prudent diplomacy, within the broader goal of concluding the enlargement progress. The recent agreement between FYROM and Greece on the name "Republic of North Macedonia", which helped overcome decades of conflict and recrimination and was strongly supported by EU institutions, is deserving of specific mention in this regard.

Ultimately, the EU's externalisation policy cannot compensate for Europe's inability to manage migration related issues on the domestic side. Instead of promoting the idea of migration as a threat, the EU should prioritise its own migratory and asylum system in order to handle fluid mixed migration flows, transforming the phenomenon into an opportunity for a stronger and reformed EU.

This would not only help strengthen the legitimacy of EU institutions and policies, but also decrease migratory burdens on neighbouring or EU candidate states that are even less able to handle the phenomenon.

[12] European Commission, *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans* (COM/2018/65), 6 February 2018, p. 7, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0065.

[13] Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2019. The Great Puzzle: Who Will Pick Up the Pieces?*, January 2019, p. 32-35, http://report2019.securityconference.de.

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