

EU FORUM MIGRATION

A MACEDONIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE MIGRATION CRISIS

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The refugee/migrant crisis of 2015 and its aftermath in 2016 isn't a 'typical' refugee crisis. The development of the crisis leads to the conclusion that Europe and the world face a phenomenon of refugee migration or movement of peoples unprecedented in recent history. In this definition of the crisis, not just the numbers have played a role. Although most of the people were indeed trying to escape war, unlike 'usual' refugees finding a 'safe harbour' in the first safe country, it wasn't their final goal. Most of them embarked on a long journey through several south-eastern European countries, determined to reach the 'desired destination for a better life', and in almost all cases these were western European countries, especially Germany. Furthermore, alongside refugees fleeing from war, there were many refugees fleeing from extreme poverty, insurgency or long-lasting instability. Finally, Europe, or more precisely the European Union, failed to adequately address the crisis, both in their definition of the crisis (a refugee issue, mass migration or a mixed phenomenon) and in terms of effective and functioning common European asylum policies.

The divisions in the EU and the lack of a united approach affected all Balkan countries, small in territory and resources but, more importantly, weak in institutional capacity. The Republic of Macedonia, a country with weak and fragile institutions, a problematic rule of law and already in deep internal

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political crisis since 2014, found itself on the 'brink' of the 'battlefield'. The Greek-Macedonian border became a symbol for the desperate attempts of thousands of men, women and children trying to cross the border and continue to their dream destination in the European Union.

The response of the Macedonian authorities to the crisis was as chaotic and disorganised as the common EU approach to the crisis appears to be. If we take the types of responses to the crisis as a criterion for evaluation, Macedonia passed through three phases in the crisis of 2015. Yet these phases weren't planned and they occurred spontaneously: local crisis management entailed actual day-to-day decisions, very often varying between desperate efforts to get international European support in dealing with the crisis, situations of clear disregard for international legal obligations and political opportunism for internal purposes.

The first phase commenced at the start of the crisis in early spring 2015 and lasted until the beginning of the summer. Refugees or migrants were predominantly treated as persons illegally crossing the borders and only secondarily as asylum seekers. Unfortunately, the temporary detention centre for asylum seekers – located in Gazi Baba, a suburb of Skopje, and established almost a decade ago in order to fulfil requirements from the European Commission to get the desired visa liberalisation (alongside repatriation contracts with all EU member states and integrated border controls) – apparently was never meant to be functional. In reality, the centre served only as 'window dressing'. Refugees/migrants were detained in very bad

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conditions (lack of space, bad hygiene) and the authorities didn't have a clue how to deal with people who were not actually looking for asylum in Macedonia, but wanted to proceed further to the EU.

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The beginning of the second phase corresponds with the intensification of the flow of refugees, when large numbers of persons in groups transited, mostly by train, to Serbia and further to EU countries. Contrary to the previous 'rigid' attitude when refugees/migrants were detained in the transit centre, after almost three months the Macedonian authorities, realising that the refugees/migrants were heading towards Germany and other EU countries, gave up the effort to shut the Macedonian part of the Balkan route without, at the outset, any proper registration of those transiting through Macedonia. Later on, registration did start, with some assistance from FRONTEX.

The third phase, which began in autumn 2015, is marked by the building of the metal fence, as well as violent clashes between the police and army forces on the one hand and groups of aggressive refugee men on the other, when tear gas and anti-clash devices were used. During this phase, the 'internalisation of the refugee/migrant issue' in domestic politics began. The crisis was used by the right-wing conservative 'populist' government in two directions. The first was to build an image of Macedonia, among European right-wing populist political forces, as a 'gatekeeper' of the European Christian world, while at the same time complaining about the lack of understanding in the EU of its 'historical mission'. The second direction entailed

the crisis being used as an argument by the government to reject pressure from the opposition and civil society in the country, as well as from external actors – notably the EU but also the USA and certain international organisations such as the OSCE – to implement necessary rule of law reforms and de-politicise the state institutions and public administration. These were seen or framed as impeding national methods for dealing with the migration crisis.

The outcome of the crisis has had, at least in the short term, a mostly negative impact on Macedonia's democratic development and European integration. The disorganised EU approach to the crisis will further discredit the transformational capacity of the EU integration process. Indeed, it will give more ammunition to right-wing populist and anti-European forces to discredit European politics as pure trade-offs motivated by selfish national interests. Moreover, it will provide public distraction for the government from Macedonia's own internal democratic and institutional crisis, which also needs to be resolved.

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