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www.afgazad.com

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Islamic State Coming to Balkans (I)

Elena GUS'KOVA

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The waves of refugees from the Middle East hit Europe. It's not something new for the continent and the Balkans. In the recent 25 years migration, including people evicted from homes and war refugees, has become routine. Serbs left Croatia, Kosovo, the Muslim part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croats left Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jews left Croatia and Bosnia. Last year Albanians unexpectedly went away from Kosovo. According to some reports 100 thousand of them crossed the Serbian border going to Hungary and other European countries.

So many people suddenly left! It took Belgrade a long time to find explanation. The Kosovo authorities said the people left because of rumors that many vacant working places appeared in Germany. The Serbian government was prone to believe the people left homes due to

aggravation of social problems. We believe that the unexpected flow of refugees was provoked to put more pressure on Europe and international organizations to make them recognize Kosovo. Kosovo Albanians get impatient waiting for recognition, so they start to act. They have intensified their activities in Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece. Even the statements coming from Tirana have become more radical. In these instances people moved from one place in Europe to another.



In recent years refugees from the Middle East (mainly from Syria, Iraq) and Afghanistan have come to settle down in the Balkans. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or the UN Refugee Agency, the refugees from these countries first arrived in 2008 with 77 asking for asylum in Serbia. In 2013 the number of people asking for asylum grew to 5 thousand to increase to 16 900 in 2014. 22 182 people crossed the Serbian border during the first 5 months of 2015. This is official data about refugees coming to Serbia across Macedonia from the war-torn regions of Middle East and Afghanistan. 95% of the refugees come from Syria and Afghanistan. There is a ground to believe that the real figures are much higher than the official ones.

The refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Tunisia cross the territory of Turkey and then go by sea to Greece. The further route lies through Macedonia and then Serbia. They move to Presevo, a small town located near the border. Albanians account for 90% of its population. The International Federation of Red Cross and local authorities have established a headquarters to manage emergency situations and take care of incoming refugees. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Médecins sans Frontières set up tents and offer the first aid.

Some are legal immigrants while others use trails to enter the country illegally. They use trucks,

freight cars and find ways to get around check points. 300-500 people in Presevo ask for asylum daily. In June 15 thousand immigrants got asylum in Serbia. Just think how many have already been settled in the country...

How many Middle East and Afghan Muslims have entered Serbia? Some sources say 10 thousand from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries came to the country during the first four months this year. Totally 30 thousand are expected to have come till the end of the year. Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic says 30 thousand have already entered Serbia with 1, 5 million more concentrated at the border between Syria and Turkey. As to our estimates, at least 60 thousand people had crossed the border till July.

According to Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, there are around 60 million refugees in the world with Syria (3, 9 million), Afghanistan (2, 6 million) and Somalia (1, 1 million) topping the list. Hans Friedrich Schodder, the head of the UNHCR Representation in Serbia, says the refugees from these countries are more frequently met on the streets, at bus stops and in the parks. It's worth to pay attention on the UNHCR's reaction to the refugees problem in Serbia. The organization had turned a blind eye on the issue. Now it has all changed with Schodder calling Serbia a democratic country in the heart of Europe praising it for keeping the border open. He promises to set up the infrastructure to receive refugees. The United Nations calls for doing away with all obstacles on the way of 15 million refugees from Syria and Iraq.

Planned or spontaneous refugee flows go through Hungary keeping away from the borders with Romania or Croatia. According to Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, 40.500 people have asked for asylum in Hungary this year, 28.800 of them came from Kosovo. Others arrived from the Middle East. Europe was indifferent but Hungarians were not very happy about it. Budapest has made a decision to close the border and even erect a high wall along it. Croatia wants to follow suit. Europe is critical of Hungary but it has nothing to offer as an alternative solution. As a result, more people will stay in Serbia and Macedonia. Belgrade is engaged in hard talks on European Union membership. It wants to put its best foot forward and promises to host all the refugees from the East.

Some refugees stay in Macedonia,, some move to the south of Serbia where there are many Muslims-populated areas, while some of them get settled down in Serbia towns and villages on the way. The refugees come without any documents, they get IDs and other papers in Serbia where whatever they say is taken on trust. According to international and Serbian laws, war refugees are not illegal immigrants. That's why Serbia takes care of them. Refugee camps or reception centers are set up in Banja Koviljaca, a popular tourist town and spa situated in the Loznica municipality, Bogovadia, a town located 70 km from Belgrade, Krnjaca, an urban neighborhood half an hour's drive from central Belgrade, Senica, a town located in the south of the country, and Tutin, a town and municipality in the Raska region of Serbia – all under the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration.

Europe is slow in tackling the problem of refugees. The text of agreement on the issue is still being worked out. In two years European countries have given refuge to 60 thousand people coming from the Middle East with first stops in Italy and Greece. Nobody is willing to accept binding quotas. The Greek Orthodox countries of the Balkans will have to solve the problem on

their own. Serbia faces the fallout from many years of wars. It is also hit by economic crisis. For 20 years it has been unable to solve the problem of Serbian refugees coming from Croatia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The flows of immigrants create a heavy burden for the country to shoulder. But there is one more problem which is almost invisible.