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Refugee Flows Plunge Europe into Crisis

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The refugee problem in Europe has been getting increasingly exacerbated, despite the attempts by Brussels to divert public attention by using the events in Syria, Ukraine and the Baltic States to whip up anti-Russian hysteria.

Four countries of Central and Eastern Europe – Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – have stated their intent to close the borders and block the so-called Balkan route, the main itinerary used by refugees to reach Western Europe. Austria leads the group of countries which are united by history, business and regional interests.

«As long as a coherent European strategy is lacking, it is legitimate for the countries along the

Balkan route to protect their borders», Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak told Der Spiegel news weekly.

This argument is hard to counter. The refugee quota system to relocate and resettle asylum seekers among EU states imposed by Germany has proven to be unworkable.



There are two core reasons why this effort is doomed. *First*, the measure that affects the whole of Europe was prepared hastily. *Second*, the problems which generate refugee flows have not been solved. The conflict in Syria continues. Turkey's reckless actions are fraught with risk to aggravate the situation. Miroslav Lajcak said, that when it comes to Europe's problems European states cannot rely on Turkey. The Minister also questioned the effectiveness of the distribution of refugees between the EU countries. *«It has just become an additional stimulus for the migration»*, he said.

Last year, the EU did not listen to Bratislava, which did not use the right of veto. Actually, the stance taken by the Visegrad group could have gone unnoticed if not for Austria. The countries making up the so-called United Europe led by Germany cannot ignore Austrian position on the issue. The Austrian Republic is a pillar of European integration. Berlin was upset last month, when Austria said it would limit the number of asylum seekers to 37,500 in 2016, after taking in about 90,000 last year, raising fears of a massive migrant backlog on the Balkan route if Vienna seals the border.

German Der Spiegel wrote *«Eastern European countries are taking a course of open confrontation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The counties of the Visegrad Group want the closure of the so-called Balkan route of the refugees»*.

Austria will close its borders for refugees, when it accepts the quota of some 37,000 people, and then Macedonia will have to stop the migrants flow, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz said on February 12. *«Austria, one of the three countries, along with Germany and Sweden, which accept refugees most of all. Our decision will cause consequences for the states of the so-called Balkan route, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia... Macedonia will have to*

completely stop the flow of refugees», Kurz was quoted as saying by Macedonian Nova TV broadcaster.

After taking in the quota of 37,000 refugees and closing the borders, Austria will send the police and military forces under the direct command of the Macedonian authorities as well as provide other necessary assistance, the Foreign Minister added.

The Balkan route goes beyond the territories of Macedonia and Serbia. The latter's government is not able to make an independent decision. As usual, it is waiting for the instructions to come from the European Commission. The refugees have to cross the territory of Greece on the way to other European countries. It creates a knot of contradictions, especially in view of Ankara's unpredictable policy and the deteriorated state of Greek-Turkish relations. The events in Syria and Turkey eclipsed NATO initiative on refugees. NATO defense ministers at their last meeting agreed to use their maritime force in the Eastern Mediterranean to help combat traffickers. The ships work with Turkish and Greek coastguards and the European Union border agency Frontex.

Unlike the EU's maritime mission off the Italian coast, which brings rescued migrants to Europe's shores, NATO will return migrants to Turkey even if they are picked up in Greek waters. The NATO naval force is under German command. While trying to present Germany as the best friend of refugees, a leading protector of European democratic values and «open society», the government of Angela Merkel initiates a military operation to intercept refugees in Greek territorial waters. The ships will have to turn away the boats with dozens of thousands of people.

According to French Libération, around 70 thousand people have come to Greece from Turkey this year. The French newspaper makes one surmise that it's not about migrants only. It's enough to remember the massive violations of Greek airspace by Turkish aircraft. Data recorded by the Greek military has shown that Turkish aircraft violated its claimed airspace over 2,000 times in 2015.

Greece raises serious concern over the air space violations. The newspaper cites Georges Sefertzis, a well-known Greek political analyst, saying the NATO patrol in the Aegean Sea can tip the fragile geopolitical balance. Aside from the growing tensions in Syria, the Greek-Turkish relations will go through an acid test, in particular, when it comes to the sea boundaries disputes. According to Sefertzis, the mission of NATO ships is to make the boats with migrants return to Turkey. It will give rise to a number of questions. The Aegean dispute is a set of interrelated controversial issues between Greece and Turkey over sovereignty and related rights in the area of the Aegean Sea. Standard territorial waters are currently 12 nautical miles (22 km). The current value has been enshrined in treaty law by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 (Art.3). In the Aegean the territorial waters claimed by both sides are still at 6 miles.

The possibility of an extension to 12 miles has fueled Turkish concerns over a possible disproportionate increase in Greek-controlled space. Turkey has refused to become a member of the convention. It considers the convention as *res inter alios acta*, i.e. a treaty that can only be binding to the signing parties but not to others. Greece, which is a party to the convention, has stated that it reserves the right to apply this rule and extend its waters to 12 miles at some point

in the future, although it has never actually attempted to do so. Turkey argues that the special geographical properties of the Aegean Sea make a strict application of the 12-mile rule in this case illicit in the interest of equity. Turkey has itself applied the customary 12-mile limit to its coasts outside the Aegean.

With these unsettled disputes in mind, which country should receive a warning first? Sefertzis believes that the operation of NATO naval force will make the issue of maritime border disputes come to the surface again.

The deteriorating German-Austrian contradictions, the growing discontent of the Visegrad group, the escalation of tensions between Greece and Turkey and the NATO's intention to move closer to the positions of Russian military in Syria – these are extremely dangerous implications of the aggravating all-European crisis that Brussels and Washington are trying to paint as something that boils down exclusively to the humanitarian problems related to the refugee crisis.

The list of current and potential conflicts is not full. For instance, the European Commission wants Ukraine to host 100 thousand migrants from North Africa and the Middle East. Brussels believes that sharing the burden will demonstrate Kiev's readiness to join the EU as a member. Serbia is viewed as a potential regional center to host asylum seekers in Southeastern Europe. Perhaps, it will have to give refuge to the very same people the Czech Republic and Slovakia refuse to let in.