Editorial

A Human Tide on Foot across the Balkans

By the time the EU hosted its High-Level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkan Route on 8th October and adopted a plan of “collective action”, over half a million refugees had already made their way up through the Balkans into Austria, Germany, Sweden and a few other member states since the previous Spring.

The Conference did nothing to stem the flow of refugees, migrants, asylum seekers. No matter how they are categorised by the authorities of the countries they transit, they are all part of the human tide of suffering - men, women and children fleeing from the civil war in Syria and from other troubled parts of the Middle East and beyond, seeking a safe haven. This river of human misery, which has been relentless, is a painful reminder of Europe’s failure to address the multiple crises in its neighbourhood in a timely manner, let alone address their root causes.

European Union - without unity or solidarity

With the lack of an EU agreed plan of action before the summer, despite the European Commission’s relocation proposal for greater burden sharing of asylum seekers across the EU member states made way back in May, the response from individual member states further emphasised an unprecedented degree of disunity and lack of solidarity within the EU. From the Hungarian government’s erection of barbed wire fences reminiscent of a past that we hoped we would never see again, to the Slovak and Czech leaders expressing their aversion to accepting muslim refugees, gone was the spirit of generosity which had characterised the European project up until the accession of 12 states from Central and Southeast Europe. The shameful behaviour of the Czech government warranted a strong condemnation from the UN on 22nd October which accused it of deliberately committing systematic violations of the rights of refugees in order to deter others from arriving.

Fortunately, countless volunteers and non-governmental organisations stepped in and did everything they could to provide food, comfort and basic necessities. It was not enough, however, to prevent many vulnerable groups of refugees to fall victim of ruthless smuggling gangs, leading several to their untimely death, abandoned in airless trucks or lost at sea.

Unscrupulous behaviour is unfortunately not confined to the smugglers, with some commercial interests in the transit countries profiting from the plight of the refugees. For example, the Macedonian State Railways more than doubled the price of rail tickets - from 5 to 25 euros per person - for the short train journey from the border with Greece to the border with Serbia. With an estimated average of 4,000 migrants taking the train every day,
someone in Macedonia has been making a healthy profit from this human traffic. The government most concerned should be more forceful in stamping out such blatant extortion.

With no end in sight, EU leadership more urgent than ever

This human tide moving towards Western Europe is likely to continue unabated for the foreseeable future. Already according to latest reports, 35,000 refugees are fleeing the upsurge in fighting in Aleppo. With winter fast approaching, proper shelters and a more orderly reception and processing of the refugees will be essential, particularly in the transit countries. The Western Balkan route will remain the favoured option by the refugees both for relative safety reasons and because of hurdles erected on other smuggling routes.

The urgency for leadership in addressing the worst refugee crisis Europe has faced since World War II spurred the EU to convene the High-level Conference on 8th October. In calling for “collective action”, the leaders sought to bring into play its ongoing relationships with its nearest neighbours - “From the solid base of stabilisation and association, enlargement or neighbourhood processes that anchor our relations, we agree today to step up our engagement in response to the current refugee crisis”. This was a belated recognition by the EU that it had failed to provide timely and effective support to the countries most affected, despite being part of the EU’s enlargement policy.

But as the images from the Balkan region continue to testify, the actions agreed on 8th October and the funds allocated by the EU are clearly not sufficient. A second, more restricted, high-level meeting was convened on 25th October, with the leaders from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, as well as Albania, Serbia and Macedonia invited to attend. The Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council, the current and future rotating presidencies of the Council (Luxembourg and the Netherlands), as well as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees were also in attendance. The meeting agreed on a “17 point plan of pragmatic and operational measures”, where increased border management and implementation of the recently agreed EU-Turkey Action Plan feature prominently.

EU relations with Turkey

Meanwhile, the EU has been literally bending over backwards to engage with Turkey, in the hope that the country will cooperate in stemming the flow of refugees leaving for Western Europe. Unfortunately, this cooperation comes at a price. The EU Joint Action Plan with Turkey, adopted by the European Council on 16 October, provides for substantial financial support to help Turkey in dealing with the over 2.5 million that have taken refuge in the country, acceleration of the visa liberalisation process and an acknowledgement that the “accession process needs to be re-energised”. One of the positive outcomes of visa liberalisation would of course be a stronger border control of its coastal waters, as indeed a change in Turkey’s visa policy.

Another consequence of this race to gain Turkey’s favours and its support in addressing the refugee crisis is a delay in the adoption by the European Commission of the Enlargement Package 2015-16 which should have been adopted by the College on 11 October. It is now expected to be adopted in early November, that is, after the early Parliamentary elections taking place in Turkey on 1st November. Whatever the reasons for this last minute delay, it does not set a good precedent in the EU’s enlargement policy, with the entire process being affected because of relations with one country.

Concluding note

The unprecedented scale of the refugee crisis will require a more determined collective effort by the EU and all its member states than has been apparent up to now. There can be no prevarication by any member state when it comes to respect for binding international standards and legal principles. At the same time, more determined diplomatic efforts will be needed to deal with the worsening crisis in Syria. So long as fighting continues in this turbulent region, the human tide of desperate people fleeing towards Western Europe will continue unabated.

* See, e.g. the restricted visa policy of Tunisia; EUNAVFÖR MED Operation Sophia off the coast of Libya entering its second phase; and new measures to stem migratory flows from Africa to be adopted at the Valetta Summit on Migration taking place on 11/12 November.

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