

U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing: “Europe’s Refugee Crisis: How Should the US, EU, and OSCE Respond?” – October 20, 2015

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Challenges facing Macedonia in regards to Refugee Crisis

Macedonia has made great strides in the face of one of the most challenging crises of the 21st century, but no country can manage this crisis unilaterally. Lack of infrastructure led to isolated clashes between border police and refugees desperate to move through Macedonia on their way into Europe. In July, Macedonia passed legislation to allow the migrants 72 hours to pass through the country, allowing them to enter and exit the country legally. Special transportation has been arranged to move the refugees, a large number of police have been hired to register refugees and increase security, and the government is working in tandem with local and international NGOs to provide assistance to the refugees. Macedonia has done all this without closing its borders as other states have and is once again a regional leader in keeping up with the democratic and humanitarian values it shares with its western allies. However, growing costs are putting increased strain on an already heavily burdened economy. A prompt, unified response from the international community, led by the United States and the European Union, is needed to address not only the problems that led to this crisis but also the problems that have stemmed from it.

Macedonia, a country with a population of approximately two million people, is currently contending with an unprecedented number of migrants moving through its territory. From January to June, 124,000 migrants passed through Greece, a 750% increase over the previous year. In the short time from June 1st the rate at which migrants are entering Europe increased even more rapidly. Since June, over 140,000 migrants have passed through Greece. In this four-month period, more refugees have entered Macedonia through Greece than in all of last year. This number is only a fraction of the total number that has entered Europe this year. Only a tiny fraction of the refugees who enter Macedonia seek asylum there; only 550 have done so since the crisis began. A majority of the migrants who enter Europe through Greece proceed further into Europe through Macedonia’s southern border near Gevgelija, a town with less than 16,000 inhabitants and vastly insufficient infrastructure to deal with such a high number of migrants. Recently, the southern border has seen up to 10,000 migrants crossing into the country per day.

Although Macedonia is a transit country for the refugees on their way deeper into Europe, the cost associated with the crisis is continually growing. At a recent American Bar Association-Rule of Law Initiative panel discussion on refugee crisis, Macedonian Ambassador to the United States Dr. Vasko Naumovski stated that the increased police force needed to maintain the security of the southern border is costing Macedonia over \$100,000 per day. Macedonia is helping to assure the security of the European Union as the refugees pass through by registering and fingerprinting the refugees, reducing the risk of Islamic extremists slipping into Europe with the flow of refugees. As the number of people entering the country each day increases, the cost of this task increases substantially. Serbia’s Ambassador Djerdj Matkovic, on the same panel,

stated that the cost of simply feeding and providing water to the refugees is close to €20,000 per day, and with almost equal numbers of refugees moving through Macedonia, the costs are similar. With winter approaching, refugees will need heated shelters and additional services to keep them safe from the elements, which will drive up the cost of the crisis in the region even higher. Without increased foreign aid to address the growing burden on already taxed economies, the Balkans will not be able to maintain the services that are being provided for the refugees as they enter the countries.

The amount of funds that Macedonia receives from the EU to deal with this incredibly complicated issue is inadequate. Macedonia receives less than a quarter of the funding from the EU that Serbia does for migrant management, even though each country experiences a similar number of migrants. This figure is not an indictment of Serbia, but of the disjointed response from the international community. In addition to the €8.2 million package that Serbia is receiving through 2020 to expand its capacity for migrants, reform its asylum system and improve border security, it was recently granted €630,000 to address issues related to the influx of migrants and improve infrastructure including waste disposal, water and sanitation. In comparison to Serbia, the only funding Macedonia received from the EU was a mere €90,656. In stark contrast is the funding that Greece receives to address issues related to migration crisis. Despite the fact that most refugees cross Greece to enter Macedonia, Greece receives over 5,000 times more funding than Macedonia. In the period from 2014 to 2020, Greece will receive €474,192,915 to address issues related to this crisis. Norway, a non-EU member state, has given nearly as much aid unilaterally to the Balkans, namely Serbia and Macedonia, as the entirety of the EU with its aid package of NOK 60 million, nearly \$7.5 million.

Resolution of the current crisis is viable only if responsibility is shared. No single country can rely solely on its own resources to solve a problem as complex as this. Macedonia has been a long-time friend and loyal ally to the United States since its own independence, and now the United States should be a leader in supporting Macedonia and its neighbors affected by the crisis and lead a common response with Europe with increased aid and technical assistance. If the EU wants to retain its position as a powerful global player that is genuinely committed to the promotion of peace, democracy and human rights, it must provide a unified and resolute response to the current migrant crisis. This includes providing adequate support to Macedonia and other non-EU states, which is crucial in ensuring that governments meet their obligations under international law to treat all migrants with dignity. Lastly, the United States must use its diplomatic resources-at-hand to bring upon a solution to Macedonia's NATO membership, so that the country can officially become a member at the 2016 Warsaw Summit.