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BALKANS

The migration crisis endangers Serbo-Croat relations?

The number of migrants traveling along the Balkan route of migrants is constantly increasing. The issue of the treatment of the refugees or the economic migrants is seriously impacting the political and diplomatic relations among the States of the Balkans. The decision of the Hungarian government to halt and repress the flow of migrants affected the position of the other countries of the region. In particular the block of Hungarian boundaries pushed the migrants, concentrated in Serbia, toward Croatia. Croatia formally joined the European Union on the 1st of July 2013 but, despite the signing of the treaty at the same time, is outside the Schengen Agreement area so far.

Since the Hungarian decision, the number of migrants that entered in Croatia quickly increased up to 65.000 persons, according to Croatian Interior Minister Ranko Ostojic. Until the 22nd September, Croatia accepted to receive migrants from Serbia and rapidly transfer them to the north ensuring a minimum standard of assistance. The increasing number of migrants, that reached the 8.000 units on a daily basis in the second week of September, caused problems at the Croatian reception system and Zagreb decided to reject the migrants. The crisis, that also caused clashes between the migrants and the Croatian police, lead to a stalemate. Thousands of migrants were abandoned in no man's land between Tovarnik, a Croatian town, and the Serbian village of Šid. While Serbia demands the opening of the Croatian boundary, Zagreb

requests a sharing of the migrants with the other countries involved, first among them Hungary, but also Romania and Bulgaria. Croatia in fact believes that there is a secret agreement between Belgrade and Budapest.

The migrants' dispute between Croatia and Serbia sharply turned in a wider political quarrel.

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić accused Zagreb for its discriminatory policies, that "can only be compared with measures taken in the past, during the fascist Independent Croatia". Zoran Milanović, Croatian Prime Minister, answered back that the block is due to the fact the Serbia is "sending refugees only to Croatia, in an organized manner, in agreement with Hungary" and that he "won't allow that they (the Serbs) make fools out of us". In reaction to the closure of the Croatian border, Serbian government decided to ban the imports from Croatia. As a retaliation Zagreb banned the majority of Croatian cargo transports toward Serbia. The escalation of accusations and actions between Croatia and Serbia marks the lowest point of the bilateral relationship in years.

After the bloody wars in the 1991-1995, Serbia and Croatia faced with difficult a long period of normalization. The atrocities of the war and its processual tail, the border dispute on the Danube and the Croatian recognition of Kosovo undermined the normalization process. The asylum-seekers crisis can potentially endangers the improvement of the relations between Serbia and Croatia. Last week Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, met both the Serbian and the Croatian Prime Ministers and affirmed that: "Closing borders is never a solution, and in that part of our continent might bring back difficult feelings and emotions that we do not need at this moment".