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**NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION**

**STRATEGIC TRENDS**

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**BALKANS**

**The Western Balkan route of migrations**

On the 17th of June Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter Szijjarto announced the decision of the Government to build a 4 metre-high fence that will run all the way along the 175 km border with Serbia. The announcement caused the indignation of large part of European public opinion, mostly because of the deep symbolic impact of the construction of a new wall in Europe.

The decision of the Government of Hungary, led since 2010 by Viktor Mihály Orbán, has in many aspects more general political causes and consequences. After a controversial reform of the constitution, the Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Alliance) obtained a large majority, and its leader Orbán took a contradictory position on democracy and expressed harsh critiques against the European Union. Even though the Hungarian decision was led by internal political considerations, it raised the issue of the western Balkan route of migrations.

Together with the Mediterranean route, the Balkans route is the most important road for migrants heading towards the European Union countries. If in the previous years the Balkan route was rarely used because of its dangerousness, recently the increasing number of crises and migrants lead to a new and growing importance of this itinerary. Due to its participation to the Schengen Agreement, Hungary became the entrance door of the EU - only in the running year, about 57.000 migrants illegally entered Hungary. Considering that in the whole 2014 about 43.000 (about 19950 in 2013) people entered the country, the increase is evident.

However, as we said before, Hungary is only the last stage of the migrants’ route. In fact, 95% of the migrants arrives from Serbia. The western Balkan route usually starts in Greece, continues in the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), where the immigration policies are particularly weak and the reception system inadequate, and arrives in Hungary via Serbia. During his visit in Norway Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić replied to the Hungarian decision: "I am surprised and shocked. (…) Building walls is not the solution. Serbia can't be responsible for the situation created by the migrants, we are just a transit country. Is Serbia responsible for the crisis in Syria?" he then provokingly asked whether Serbia should build walls on its frontier with Macedonia.

Nonetheless, what surprisingly emerges from a report issued by Eurostat on the occasion of the World Refugee Day of 20 June 2015 is that during the first three months of this year, out of the 185.000 first time asylum seekers that applied for protection in the European Union (the number is almost stable compared with the last quarter of 2014), 48.900 were Kosovars. In the first quarter of 2015 in fact 26% of the total number of first time applicants originates from Kosovo, followed by Syria (16%) and Afghanistan (7%). More than true refugees, Kosovars asylum seekers are economic migrant.

In conclusion, although the western Balkan route of migration was undoubtedly affected by the Middle East crisis, it appears to remain mainly a regional Balkans issue.