



THE SITUATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN ALBANIA

Observation from the written and electronic media

April 2016

Since the situation of the emigration of Syrian refugees is in the focus of the international and national media, Albania as all the European countries has been one of the targets for their accommodation lately. Syrians have come close to Albanian borders and our state is preparing itself to bear with this situation in different ways.

It has been a long time since Observatory for the Children's Rights has been building its capacity to be ready to handle this situation. Despite its readiness to be involved in emergency situation with its staff in the 12 regions of Albania and all the preparation in trainings of emergency/humanitarian situation assessment and children/human rights monitoring in emergency/humanitarian situation, Observatory has also made a scan of the Syrian refugees situation reflected in the international and national written and electronic media. In this material you can find an overview of the situation of Syrian Refugees concerning Albania from different lenses of observations.

International media signals Albania

- The arrival of Syrian refugees to Albania seems inevitable. International news agency "Euro news" and British "Sunday times" reported on January that for Syrian refugees arriving from Greece, Albania will soon serve as a transit country as Macedonia is tightening its borders. British media speculated on a number of 75 thousand refugees that could arrive to Albania.
- Greek portal protothema.org, reported that the refugees will not only use Albania as transit route but they will settle in Korca and Gjirokastra.
- International Business Monitoring Agency, Fitch Ratings, in its latest assessment report lists "refugee/emigrant crisis" as one factor that could affect Albanian economy in the near future. Albania may become a transit route for refugees who are trying to get to northern Europe, as countries such Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia have closed their borders.
- Italian newspaper "La Stampa" reported on March 2nd, that a possible wave of refugees will soon hit Albanian borders which will later try to reach Italian shores through high-speed boats. Reporters of "La Stampa" have been installed in Kapshtica



- border point between Albania and Greece, which is thought to be the first point of arrival.
- The prestigious “The Economist” wrote that Albania may soon have to deal with refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq who are blocked in Greece from entering to Europe through Macedonia.
 - Greek media reported on March 19, that some 200 refugees, including women and children, have been placed in former school buildings in the town of Doliana, 25 km away from the Albanian border. Greek authorities plan to place around 2000 refugees along the borderline with Albania. Currently, there are around 46 thousand refugees stranded in Greece.
 - Greece started building three camps of refugees near Albanian border, in Janina. One of the camps in Pogona field will host 200 refugees, whereas the other camp in Janina will have a capacity of 700 refugees.

Attention, measures, plans and commitment of the Albanian Government

- Albania’s Director of Civil Emergencies, Shemsi Prenci, declared (On January) that three former military camps will be used as refugee hubs.
- **Meeting in Amsterdam** - Minister Bushati said that the Albanian authorities are committed to taking measures and monitoring the situation, in cooperation with neighboring countries and with the specialized UN and EU agencies.
- Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly took place in Tirana – where it was emphasized that a solid cooperation platform is needed. Parliament Speaker, Ilir Meta, attended the event: Europe needs a stronger Mediterranean. A safer Mediterranean would mean a safer Europe. According to him, an action plan to cope with the refugees crisis should be drafted by Europe and Mediterranean.
- Albanian Minister of Defense, Mimi Kodheli on 24th of February said in front of the Parliamentary Committee of National Security that the government is taking measures to welcome an influx of refugees. This was also confirmed by Deputy Minister of Interior, Elona Gjebrea.



- In a meeting between EU commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos and Albania's interior minister, Saimir Tahiri, who had met to discuss the migrant crisis and security challenges on 25th of February, it was ensured that Albania will be supported in case of a refugee flow .
- Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama on 25th of February, said during an interview for Top Channel that the country will not become a new route for the migrants heading west. "We don't have the conditions, the strength or the enthusiasm to change the world, while others close borders," According to the premier, Albania cannot bear the whole burden on its own, but if that load will be equally allocated his country would take the share it would be given.
- Minister of Interior, Saimir Tahiri, said during an interview that the refugee crisis is not only a challenge for Albania but for all countries of the European Union. Responding to a potential refugee crisis should be done in cooperation and commitment of all countries. This is not a crisis that can be handled by one or two countries, like Greece or Italy, but it is a problem we all share and the commitment of EU is imperative for managing this situation.
- Dozens of Rapid Intervention Forces (RIF) officers have been deployed to the border checkpoints with Greece and Macedonia to face a possible flux of Syrian refugees. Korca police confirmed that officers have been stationed in the green area of the customs of Kapshtica, to support the border patrol units. Structures of RIF have been sent to the customs' checkpoints of Qafe-Thana, Kapshtica, Tre-Urat, Kakavija, Qafe-Bota, as well, and they are available and keeping an eye on the situation in the border.
- During “Top Story” TV show, Deputy Minister of Interior, Gjebrea said discussion with Greece are ongoing and that support from European Union is imperative if Albania admits refugees. Gjebrea also explained that a special agreement with Italy has been reached as Italian troops and some 450 FNSH troops (special intervention forces) have been already located at border with Greece anticipating a potential arrival of a refugee flux.
- Deputy Minister of Interior, Ilir Marko, while reporting in front of Parliament’s Committee of Foreign affairs, said that only 50-60 refugees have attempted to cross the border into Albania in the last 2 months but their entrance has been denied because they lacked documents. These emigrants came from countries such as Mali and Pakistan, and not from war zones. He also said that unlike Macedonia and Greece, Albania still hasn’t



faced a massive flux of refugees and the decision to admit refugees will be a political decision.

- Since March 7th, over 50 border police troops in Korca have been patrolling around the clock throughout the borderline with Greece. Rapid intervention forces are also located near the border, monitoring the so-called “refugee cross points”.
- General Director of Borders, Genc Merpeeza, said that in case of a refugee flux, State Police will ask for help from the Army Forces in order to keep the borders under control. Currently the situation at the border is calm, although small group of immigrants have arrived in Konica, some 27 km away from the Greek- Albanian border. According to the police, Albania can host some 2000 refugees. Only last week, police caught 5 Morocco nationals in Gjirokastra who were sent back to Greece.
- Parliament Speaker Ilir Meta said that it is plausible that Albania will be affected by the refugee crisis and that as part of Euro-Atlantic family, Albania will act within its capacities and it will give its contribution. Meta also said that US and EU need intervene and help solve the conflict in Syria, which has caused the refugees crisis.
- Chair of Parliament’s European Integration Committee, Majlinda Bregu, criticized the government for not taking any measures over the refugee crisis that is approaching Albania. Bregu said that not only there is a need for a concrete plan by the government but the Security Council should meet and address the potential organized crime and trafficking of refugees during their transit stay in Albania.
- **Government establishes Committee on Refugees** - This Committee will serve as a decision making authority for asylum and refugees and it will be responsible for managing a potential refugee influx that are expected to arrive in Albania. The Committee will be chaired by a National Commissioner with members from Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, State Secret Services and Helsinki Committee.
- Dimitris Avramopoulos, In Tirana, on March 18th, reassured that Albania will not be alone and EU will be ready to assist the Albanian government in all aspects in case of a migrant influx . He has welcomed the Albanian government news for the emergency plan to deal with refugees and also asked from Albanian officials to put more effort on reducing the illegal migration. On the other hand, Minister of Interior, Saimir Tahiri, said that Albania is willing to help with the refugee crisis so to serve its duties and take responsibility but there is a need for more coordination in this context, considering all



measures: from exchange of information to solid structures for initial admitting of refugees”.

- Besides the ex-military camp of Kapshitca, two other camps in Korca will be established for accommodating Syrian migrants that are expected to arrive in Albania. The Pocesta and Drenova camps near Korca can host together around 3,000 people as conditions there have been inspected by local civil emergency authorities. Ministry of Interior has approved the use of the Pocesta military camp to accommodate refugees.
- The general director of the Borders and Immigration Department, Genc Merepeza said that so far 3 points have been identified, through which Syrian refugees are likely to enter Albania. These points are along the border of Greece, however no movement has been detected yet, Merepeza said. He also announced that 15 scanners are being installed in the border police stations, in order to fingerprint all the refugees that will enter Albania.
- March 23 - Minister of Defense, Mimi Kodheli, declared that there is no room for concern that the country will get de-stabilized in case of an immigrant influx that come mainly from war zones. Kodheli said that in case of a refugee influx, Albania will be prepared and it will be assisted by the European Union.
- Minister Saimir Tahiri said during a hearing session in the parliamentary Committee of National Security on March 23 that Albania has taken preliminary measures to deal with a possible migrant influx. "Albania, like the other countries of the region or Europe, is not immune from the migrant factor. In this framework, the government has taken the preliminary measures such as the Emergency Plan developed by Council of Ministers, tightening border monitoring and security. He said also that during the last 2 years, over five thousand people from war countries have tried to enter Albania, but the state police, in cooperation with partners, has identified them and based on the national and international legal framework they were deported to the country where they crossed the border.
- OSCE trains Albanian police - The OSCE Presence in Albania launched a series of workshops for the Albanian border and migration police with the aim of raising their capacity to respond to the challenges of irregular migration, particularly in light of the increased migrant flows through the Western Balkans. The first of the workshops, which are being organized in close partnership with the Directorate of the Albanian State Police and the General Directorate of Border and Migration, took place in Korça, where 20 border and migration police were trained on measures to be taken to cope with the situation. The subjects were based on trends as identified by Frontex and EUROPOL, and



included migrant routes, the pre-screening of migrants, profiling of possible terrorist fighters, and the detection of criminal offences. The workshop was conducted by experts from the Albanian Europol National Unit and the Albanian Border and Migration Police. The OSCE Presence, together with its Albanian partners, will organize similar workshops in the coming days with the border and migration police in Gjirokastra and in Shkodra.

Civil Society Organization and Human Rights Institutions

- International organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, Red Cross, UNICEF, Save the Children etc. have continuously asked Albanian authorities to take measures and they have so far offered their assistance in materials supplies such as tents, containers, clothes, medications and other emergency equipment. UNHCR has suggested that Albania can shelter 3000-4000 refugees. UNHCR also suggested that Albania could serve as registration base for refugees.
- Totozani in Tabanovce: We will monitor the conditions of refugee treatment -- Albanian Ombudsperson, Igli Totozani, who also serves as President of Mediterranean Ombudspersons, visited the border point of Tabanovce between Macedonia and Greece. Some 700,000 refugees from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries have crossed this border point in the last 7 months, including war victims, economic migrants, and unaccompanied minors and so on.
- Ombudsperson, Igli Totozani, has appealed to Albanian government to start taking measures for admitting a potential flux of refugees, according to all European, international and human rights standards. He also said that Police authorities must mobilize in enhancing security measures for refugees and stop any human trafficking attempt.
- UNHCR spokesperson Carlotta Sami, said that refugees seeking to make their way to Europe, will find alternative paths and won't be stopped by the closing of borders. As tens of thousands of migrants remain stranded in the refugee camp of Idomeni in Greece, experts predict that a new road may open from Greece to Albania through Kapshtica border, and continuing through land to Montenegro.
- On March 19th, Albania's Ombudsman Igli Totozani, made public the Regional Action Plan for dealing with the refugee crisis that was drafted in Thessaloniki by nine Ombudsmen from regional countries (Albania, Austria, Croatia, Greece,



Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey). This common plan underlines that refugees should be protected from any form of discrimination and that host countries should guarantee for their safety. It also proposes common procedures for admitting refugees and the most vulnerable groups amongst them. Totozani said that this plan prepares Albania in facing a potential influx of refugees.

- Albanian Ombudsman, Igli Totazani expressed his discontent with the authorities, because they have failed to release information on the situation or a plan of measures so far which is hampering its constitutional responsibility to monitor the measures that are being taken. “I am currently in Gjirokastra monitoring the situation, because it’s an issue of human rights. There are no camps available to welcome the refugees. The authorities need to tell us where the camps have been set up, so we can go and visit them.” -said the ombudsman.