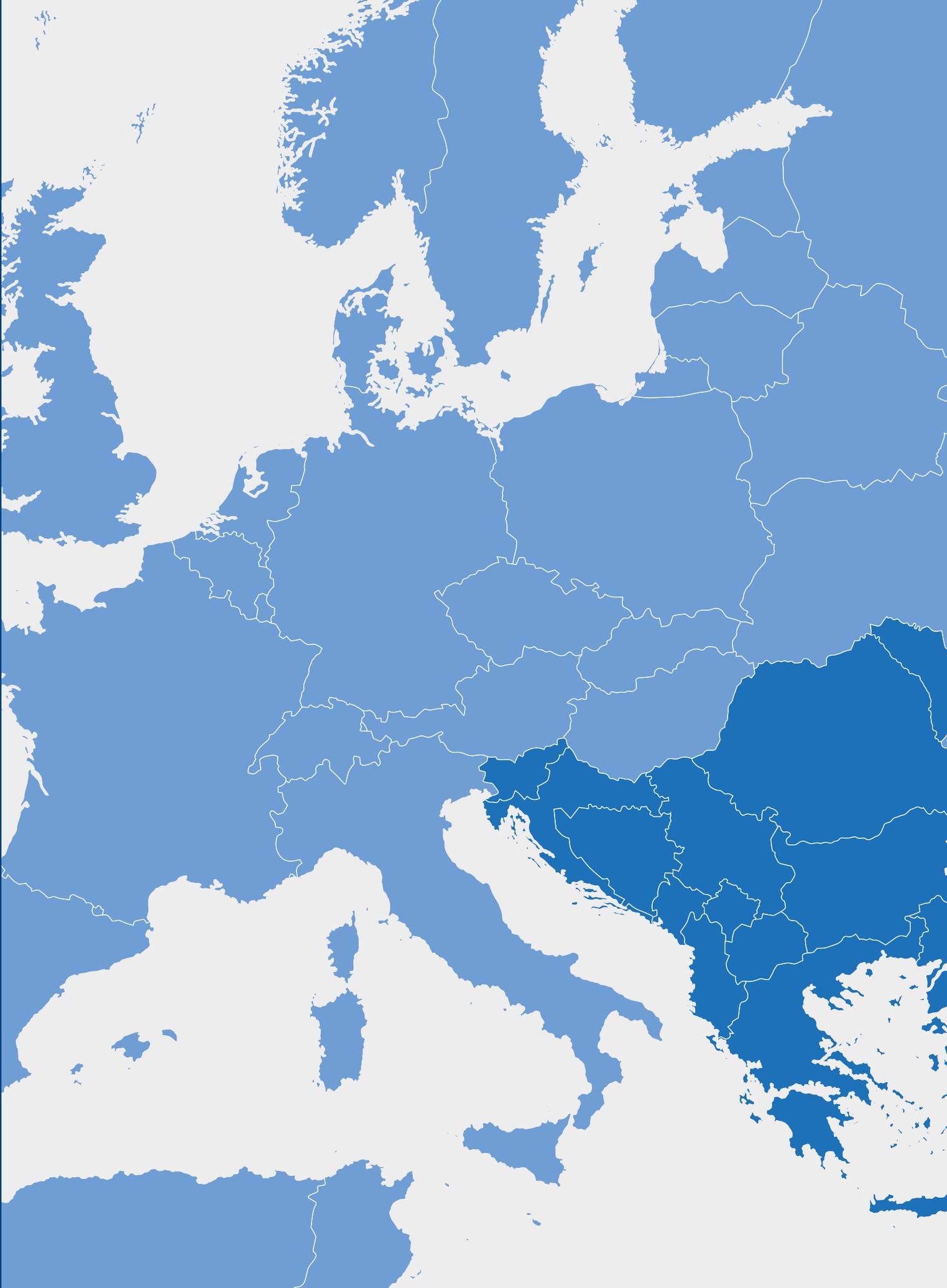


# POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS



**ADDRESSING THE COMPLEXITIES  
OF MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE**

**BRIEFING**  
Volume 1 | 2023



# EDITORIAL



Migration dynamics in Southeast Europe have evolved significantly over the past few decades. While in the 1990s, the region was characterized by flows of refugees and internally displaced people, more recently Southeast Europe has been affected by the transit of refugees and migrants from other regions of the world. The region also experienced a massive emigration of its citizens.

During the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015, the scale of the migration flow in Southeast Europe placed significant strain on resources and infrastructure, leading in some places to humanitarian crises. The international community responded with a mixture of aid, resettlement programs, and eventually border closures. While many EU members focused on policies that sought to put up barriers to migration, the countries in the region failed to offer adequate access to asylum, suitable reception conditions, and integration opportunities. The situation in Greece in 2015-2016 highlighted the adverse impact of border closures on migrants and people seeking international protection.

Lately, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and border closures, cross-border movement has continued, with an increase in border crossings since 2021. The mixed migration route starting in Turkey, passing through Greece, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, has become a significant pathway.

While the so-called Balkan route has exposed the scale of migration from the rest of the world towards the EU, countries of the region have also seen departures “en masse” from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which counts over 43% of its population living abroad. This is the highest emigration rate in the region, but other countries are experiencing massive outflows as well. The issue of Albanians emigrating has been followed closely by UK media. In 2022, Albanians in the UK made up the largest percentage of undocumented immigrants, followed by nationals from conflict zones such as Afghanistan. The reasons for such intense emigration are multiple and include economic insecurity, low wages, high living costs, crony capitalism, and corruption.

In this issue of *Political Trends and Dynamics in Southeast Europe*, we offer ground experiences and insights on one of the most important matters for this region and Europe as a whole.

The authors provide and argue for a policy pathway that adopts a humane approach, prioritizing the dignity of migrants and refugees and their right to protection, while also addressing the root causes of migration. Some insist on the need for EU assistance in the region and a greater focus on the integration of migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees. Others advocate for a stronger promotion of the nexus between development and the extensive Balkan diaspora around the world, or for enhancing internal regional mobility.

These kinds of policies would foster and rely on the region's own capacities to address such challenges. More importantly, they have the potential of shifting the discourse on migration in Southeast Europe from a negative tone to a positive one. This approach now requires international cooperation, strong political will, and a focus on long-term solutions.

*Vivien Savoye, Ioannis Armakolas and Alida Vračić*

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# SOUTHEAST EUROPE: A REGION IN TRANSITION



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## ● KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Migration dynamics in Southeast Europe have changed, with the region currently functioning as a space of transit, immobility, and settlement.
- The EU-Turkey Statement has had a negative impact across Southeast Europe.
- Beyond border controls, emphasis should be placed on reception and asylum capacities to address on-going needs as well as the likely continuing arrival of people on the move.

**M**igration dynamics in Southeast Europe have undergone significant transformations in past decades. From large scale displacement in the 1990s, and immigration to western Europe, countries in the region today are faced with the transitory movement as well as settlement of forced migrants.

Despite COVID-19 border closures, cross-border movement continued, albeit reduced. Since 2021, there has been a clear increase in border crossings. Greece registered 18,780 irregular entries in 2022, with a total of 330,000 irregular border crossings detected at the EU's external borders.<sup>1</sup> Of those, according to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX, 45% occurred via the Western Balkans, rendering the route the most used in the previous year.

### Mapping the route

Mixed migration (i. e., movement of refugees and forced migrants) is the key characteristic of the route that starts in Turkey, enters Greece, and continues onwards through Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

Until 2012, the most common passage was from Turkey to Greece and onward to Italy, through the ports of Igoumenitsa and Patra. A gradual shift occurs in 2012- partly due to the easing of visa restrictions on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia- culminating in 2015 in the *de facto* opening of the 'Balkan route'. FRONTEX estimates 764,033 people crossed<sup>2</sup>, in many cases facilitated (e. g. with free access to public transport) by the countries along the route.<sup>3</sup> In early 2016, Member States' restrictions (including Austria and Germany) had a spillover effect in the Balkan route, with countries closing their border (e. g., North Macedonia), and adopting quotas to limit numbers crossing the border (e. g., Croatia).

### The impact of the EU-Turkey Statement

Following the closure of the route in early 2016, migrant movement intermingled with long periods of waiting, either to access protection and/or the opportunity to cross the borders to northern Europe. This is very much the product of the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016.

The deal required Turkey to maintain strict border controls, accept the return of migrants from Greece that crossed via the sea border and prevent border crossings to Greece. In exchange, the EU committed to financial assistance of 6 billion<sup>4</sup> and the resettlement of a limited number of Syrians from Turkey. Multiple criticisms<sup>5</sup> have been levelled at this policy, which was introduced as a temporary and extraordinary measure and ended up transforming migration from a humanitarian issue into one of political bargaining between the EU and Turkey.

Numbers did reduce through a combination of factors: stricter border controls on the Turkish side, the closure of the Balkan route, the closure of the Turkish borders with Syria, and access to temporary protection for Syrians in Turkey. EU financial support through the 'Refugee Facility for Turkey' fund for Syrians contributed immensely to the bettering of the lives of refugees in Turkey.

Nonetheless, several aspects of the deal have not been particularly successful. Since March 2020, Turkey has refused to accept the return of asylum seekers rejected by the Greek authorities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens has not progressed, and accession negotiations are frozen, largely due to the political backsliding unfolding in Turkey since the summer of 2016 and the failed coup of the same year. In practice, the Statement is defunct, despite repeated calls by Greece and several EU member states for Turkey to implement it.

The deal came at a high cost for the refugees and migrants, as well as the countries in the region. Turkey remains to this day the main host of Syrian refugees, with 4million in the country. The economic crisis, combined with the limited resettlement of Syrians to the EU, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently the devastating earthquake of February 2023, have all contributed to an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment and violence towards Syrians, forcing some to attempt to flee to Europe.

Since 2016, Greece has been asked to carry the main burden of applying EU migration policy by adopting policies of containment (on the hotspots of eastern Aegean islands), a variation of which remain to this day. The Western Balkan countries were caught in the middle due

# Most Western Balkan countries are unable to cater to the needs of asylum seekers and forced migrants

to their geographic position and aspirations for EU membership. On the one hand, they have been asked to undertake reforms to enable stranded asylum seekers to access protection in their territory as part of their gradual integration with the Union. On the other hand, WB countries are concerned about the gradual transformation of the region into a buffer zone (like Turkey) for EU member states, which in turn pushes them to abandon more liberal asylum policies in favour of restrictive approaches.

## EU priorities and the Western Balkans

Multiple ‘crises’ in recent years, from the ‘instrumentalisation’ of migration at the external borders of the Union (e.g., Belarus-Poland), to the armed conflict in Ukraine and the arrival of almost 5 million Ukrainians under the Temporary Protection Directive in the EU, along with an increase in irregular arrivals and attempted entries in the Schengen area since 2022, have rendered migration both a foreign and domestic policy priority for EU member states. The region of the Western Balkans as a source and transit to the Schengen area is an immediate priority.

At the end of January 2023, the UNHCR estimated 9,026 new arrivals in the Western Balkans, travelling as part of mixed movement (i.e., asylum seekers & migrants), of which almost 70% were in Serbia. Characterised by uneven socio-economic growth, limited opportunities to access employment, housing, and education, most WB

countries are unable (and to an extent unwilling) to cater to the needs of asylum seekers and forced migrants. At the same time, in reaction to migratory flows, we are witnessing the growth of antimigration discourse (e.g., Serbia, Greece, Turkey), restrictions imposed on NGOs assisting people on the move (e.g., Croatia, Greece), and systematic pushbacks between borders (Hungary to Serbia, Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Greece to Turkey) in the region.

On December 6, 2022, the European Commission presented its Action Plan on the Western Balkans focusing on migration and asylum.<sup>6</sup> Twenty operational measures focus mainly on deterring irregular crossings, boosting border controls, readmissions, and returns, and swift asylum processing. FRONTEX has already signed agreements with Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia for the deployment of guards at their borders and allowing the agency executive powers (e.g., registration of persons and border checks). Negotiations are underway for a similar deal with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Austria, Serbia, and Hungary have also signed a trilateral agreement to further strengthen border security in the Western Balkans. In parallel, Serbia and Albania have been asked to change their visa policy; the visa-free regime in place for Tunisians, Cubans, Moroccans, and others is considered the reason for their increased presence in asylum applications across the EU.

An additional €40m under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) will be given covering migration management systems including surveillance systems, and detention facilities, for Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo. The plan also includes boosting of returns to the Western Balkans, primarily of their own nationals who continue to seek a better life in EU countries. With the overall focus on border security, little room is left for significant capacity building and financial boosting of reception and (re) integration measures for asylum seekers and refugees, even though this is where key gaps exist in the region.

### The challenge ahead

In the coming years, Southeast Europe will remain a region of destination and transit for mixed migratory movement, particularly as instability, conflicts, limited livelihood options, and climate-induced movement continue to affect countries in the broader neighbourhood of Europe. Coupled with the absence of safe and legal pathways to immigration, people on the move will continue to undertake dangerous journeys in order to reach safety, and will continue to encounter physical and virtual barriers blocking their path.

Current and future EU migration policies place a significant burden of responsibility on the countries of Southeast Europe for border controls and deterrence. A holistic migration and asylum policy is a key element of migration management and benefits everyone involved. The challenge for the region is to strike a balance between border controls and the robust development of asylum and reception systems that can meet current and future needs, as well as integration options for those that remain.

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# THE MOBILE BALKANS: FROM MIGRATION CRISES TO RECONNECTING THE REGION THROUGH MOBILITY



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## ● KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Balkans as a region has a long history of migration crises, but also a strong determination to reinvent itself. Emigration is perceived as a crisis, loss of the best and the brightest, and as a freedom and new opportunity.
- This article presents the four types of refugee and migration crises that characterized the region in the last three decades.
- If the migration crisis did not exist, it would have been invented by populists.

“ Here in Serbia, whether it’s war, sanctions, Kosovo, things mostly work the same way. People say, ‘the crisis in Serbia’, but it is not the crisis, it’s just Serbia ”

This statement by a Serb refugee in Belgrade who fled from Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993 illustrates three phenomena: the multiplicity and omnipresence of crises in the Balkans; the systemic affinity between migration and crisis; and the embeddedness of (migration) crises in national identity. The region has a long history of migration crises, but also a strong determination to reinvent itself. The article analyses both trends building a complex picture of the so-called “Mobile Balkans.”

### Emigration – crisis vs. freedom

Emigration is the major trend of the Balkan migration profile. In a quarter of a century, the Western Balkans has experienced an emigration rate of 28% of its current population. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the highest emigration rate (43%) compared to its population. Albania has more than 39% of its population living outside its territory and has one of the world’s highest emigration rates: during 2007–2012, Albania was ranked 4th in Europe and 14th in the world by net migration rate per 1,000 inhabitants. In Kosovo, the migration rate exceeds 30%, while the number is 25% in North Macedonia, 22% in Montenegro, and 11% in Serbia.

The emigration of the youth, most of them highly educated, is often experienced as a loss and as both a family and national trauma. However, labour migration also has a strong anti-crisis potential, as it plays a significant role in reducing unemployment and remains a crucial livelihood strategy for Western Balkan countries. For Albania it is also a cherished expression of freedom and of new opportunities that citizens had been deprived of during several long decades of a closed authoritarian regime.

### From crisis to crisis

We could summarize the three decades since the 1990s as one migration crisis after another. Yet the crises diverse in terms of causes, type of migrants or refugees, major actors, and impact. These include:

- 1991–2001: Yugoslav wars and conflicts.
- 2015–2016: Western Balkan refugee route.
- Recent years: inward and outward migration outbursts.
- Fluid political temporality: the populist migration crisis.

*The Western Balkans: migration “champion” during the Yugoslav wars and conflicts (1991–2001).* At the beginning of the 1990s, the Western Balkans generated the largest flows of forced migrations in post WWII Europe. Refugees, internally displaced persons, ethnic migrations, and human trafficking took centre stage and were a serious source of security risks.

*The Western Balkan Refugee Route (2015–2016).* If in the previous crisis the Western Balkans both produced and hosted refugees, the Syrian refugee crisis did not produce nor host migrants. Migrants came mainly from war-torn Syria but did not aim to stay in the region, only move through it towards the European Union. The Balkan refugee flow lasted for half a year – from September 2015 to March 2016 – and more than a million migrants passed towards Western Europe. The duration of the Balkan refugee route was wholly politically defined – it had to do less with the development of the refugee crisis than with the latter’s European (mis)management.

*Migration surges – in and out.* Migration and crisis have strong affinities and even peaceful periods have witnessed migration surges. They differ by cause, origin, and destination, as well as by intensity. Kosovo is faced with a double challenge: migration outbreaks of Kosovars to Western Europe, mostly to Germany, and irregular migration to Kosovo. The latter is significantly smaller. Kosovo is not an important part of the Balkan route, but recent years have seen an increase in migration flow. Albania continues to produce refugee flows: in 2015 the country was among the top five origin countries of asylum applicants in the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a transit country for migrants heading towards Western Europe, with the majority of migrants coming from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Morocco, Syria, Bangladesh, Algeria, and Iran. Mon-

tenegro is not part of the traditional Balkan route but has emerged as a transit country in the last few years. Most of the migrants there came from Morocco, a relatively rare country of origin of Balkan flows. This new trend is the result of the closure of the traditional Balkan route through North Macedonia, which stimulated the shift of itinerary to Europe through the so-called ‘coastal route’ or ‘Adriatic route,’ which involves crossing through Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### **If the migration crisis did not exist, it would have been invented by populists**

Migration crises do exist, but the provocative paraphrase of the French philosopher Sartre illustrates that populists need refugee crises as much as anti-Semites need Jews. The three migration & refugee crises examined so far have to do with real migrants and the institutional in/capacities of managing them. The fourth crisis is of different type and has to do narratives, with politics rather than policy, and with the rise and consolidation of the far-right.

The migration crisis was the crisis dreamed of by all populists. It was used by the Serbian far right to rebrand itself. In the first half of the 1990s, the Serbian far right fed on victimhood narratives based on the arrival of Serb refugees from Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, who had been “expelled from their homes by ethnic enemies”. The migration crisis of the mid 2010s allowed the Serbian far right to recalibrate its target, shifting the focus from Serbia’s neighbours as ethnic enemies to the refugees from the Middle East and Asia – which brought it closer to the European far right.

This new brand, as well as the transition from anti-Westernism to anti-immigration rhetoric, are elements of the Serbian far right’s strategy for its repositioning. Serbia did not merely join the international networks of the far right, it began to turn into one of the latter’s favourite centres, as nationalists from across Europe arrived in Serbia to support what they saw as “one of the few strongholds of white European civilization in resistance against Muslims and Western aggressors.”<sup>1</sup> The Russian far-right ideologue Alexander Dugin, author of the Fourth Political Theory, is often seen in Serbia with Jim Dowson, founder of Britain First, and the former British National Party leader Nick Griffin, who have been “exiled” from Europe: “Serbia is becoming a ‘conference room’ where Russian and European far right activists connect and strategize together.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Refugee crises in a comparative perspective**

A comparative analysis of the refugee and migration crises in the Western Balkans in the last three decades points to several trends.

- Transition from a refugee wave caused by a military conflict in the region to refugee flows caused by military and other conflicts in distant regions, such as the Middle East, Central Asia, etc.
- Transition from large-scale refugee crises spanning several countries of the Western Balkans and characterized by large flows, such as those during the Yugoslav wars and the Syrian crisis, to smaller, local flows originating from different countries, such as those of Moroccans to Montenegro and Kosovars to Germany.
- Transition from a dual migration profile of a region that both sends and receives refugees in the mid-1990s to a transit destination.
- Transition from “real” refugee crises characterized by big migration flows and institutional in/capacities of managing them to populist crisis securitizing migration as a threat to national security and a challenge to ontological in/security.

### **Beyond crises, or how to change the region’s migration profile through the migration and development nexus**

How can the migration profile of a region be changed – either from below, by changing migration flows, or from above, by changing and adopting a new migration policy? The most significant policy innovation can be summarized as a transition from management of refugee crises and irregular migration to the promotion of the diaspora and development nexus. This policy has been institutionalized in different forms in the different countries of the Western Balkans, ranging from the highest level, such as the State Ministry for Diaspora in Albania and the (former) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora in Kosovo, to that of Minister without Portfolio in North Macedonia or the Diaspora Sector at the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These are supported by various laws and strategies. Among the interesting legislative changes in this regard is the Law on Financial Support of Investments, adopted in North Macedonia in 2018, which stipulates that a diaspora investor is entitled to receive a 10% subsidy of the amount of the investment.

# “ The migration crisis of the mid 2010s allowed the Serbian far right to recalibrate its target ”

This policy turn is based on a new understanding of diaspora. Whereas diaspora is traditionally associated with trauma, exile, and memory, the new understanding of diaspora is optimistic, constructive, and associated with development: “wings of development,” “heroes of development”. The second aim of the migration management shift is the transition from “drain” to “gain,” from emigration as a loss of demographic and social capital to diaspora engagement.

The policy of diaspora engagement has two ambitious goals: to focus migration policy on a key regional characteristic – significant emigration in terms of numbers and impact; and to change the migration profile in a positive direction. It demonstrates the region’s capacity for policy innovation and for initiating a new institutionalization of migration management. Albania’s slogan for their policy on diaspora engagement is “Engage, Enable, Empower,” which sums up its strong potential impact. The policy on diaspora engagement has been institutionalized in different forms and supported by various laws, strategies, and policy tools.

Enhancing regional mobility is the second ‘wing’ of this policy transformation. Most immigrants in the Western Balkans are from neighbouring countries, not third-country nationals. Serbia is emblematic in this sense: nearly one-third (31%) of immigrants originate from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17.2% from Montenegro, and

9.1% from Croatia. Immigration primarily consists of ethnic Serbs who moved from surrounding countries. Four Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) are among the top ten countries whose residents have received work permits in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the region, Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro are the most attractive destinations for regional labour migration and mobility.

The policy of enhancing regional labour mobility facilitates post-conflict reconstruction through mobility, as well as the development of an economically and politically stable region through freer and more flexible labour mobility. Youth are crucial for this reconstruction from below, and indeed regional immigration is mostly a youth phenomenon – the largest share (60–65%) of regional immigrants are aged 24–49.

## Symbolic fights for political interpretation of migration

The migration profile of the Western Balkans is very dynamic, with the pendulum shifting from refugee crises to a migration and development nexus, from crisis management to labour mobility policy. Two visions are competing for dominating the migration narratives and policies: securitizing migration through real and constructed crises on one side, and on another, post-conflict reconstruction, connectivity from below, and prosperity of Western Balkans through regional labour mobility.

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# ALBANIA'S UNFAIR LEGAL SYSTEM AND CRONY CAPITALISM ARE INCENTIVISING MIGRATION



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## ● KEY TAKEAWAYS

The best way to combat stereotypes formed for Albanians in the UK by anti-migrant political sentiments since the Brexit campaign – commonly referring to Albanians as “aggressive people and criminals” – is to foster understanding and trust between the UK and Albania. That can be achieved by bringing people together, and collaboration in education can serve as a catalyst for addressing many of our common challenges.

# The surge of Albanian migration is a complex and nuanced phenomenon with no simple explanation

Albanian nationals made up over one third of undocumented migrants arriving in the United Kingdom in 2022, followed by nationals from conflict zones such as Afghanistan at 18% and Iran at 15%. The surge in Albanian arrivals in the UK has sparked a heated debate about why so many were coming on small boats. Though Albania is a NATO member and opened accession talks with the European Union in 2022, the number of undocumented migrants far outnumbered nationals coming from conflict zones. In December 2022, the UK Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee held an inquiry to investigate why Albanian nationals made up the largest percentage of undocumented migrants arriving in the UK that year.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been said and written about the influx from Albania. The political rhetoric has attributed it to links with organised crime networks – causing the Albanian Government to protest to the British ambassador in Albania, noting the inflammatory language and narrative used to portray Albanian migrants.<sup>2</sup> However, neither party has fully engaged in an informed discussion to understand the underlying issues causing the surge.

Though it is a complex and nuanced phenomenon with no simple explanation, as an expert witness testifying at the parliamentary hearing<sup>3</sup> into this matter, I will attempt to provide here an overview of the primary causes of the recent uptick in Albanian migration to the UK.

Three years ago, Albania was hit by its strongest earthquake in more than 40 years, leaving 32,000 Albanians homeless in 2019. This was swiftly followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a massive impact on people's employment, savings, and welfare. Since 2022, Albania has faced one of the highest rises in inflation in the last 24 years highest, at 6.7%. Food prices have also risen by 12% due to inflation, and the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSAT) reported that Albanians spent approximately 41% of their wages on food in 2021, with the economic forecast rising to 55–60% for 2022. On top of this catalogue of crises, rising inflation has been steadily increasing the cost of living and poverty rates. The World Bank estimated that 23% of Albanians were living below the poverty line in 2021. Again, projections for 2022 were worse, with poverty forecast to increase by 8.4% and the cost of living to \$6.85 per day.<sup>4</sup>

The Albanian government offers little support for people who are struggling, and wages in Albania are some of the lowest in the Balkans, with the monthly salary ranging between 56–60,666 Albanian lek, or between £425–£460. Many studies suggest that in fact, incomes are lower still, below 30,000 lek (£221) and even less in rural areas, implying that poverty may be far worse than currently estimated. Thus, the impossibly high living cost for the average Albanian is one of the major factors contributing to the current increase in Albanian migration.<sup>5</sup>

# Albania's rule of law is weak, and its judicial system is deeply corrupt

Another factor is the availability of low-skilled jobs in the UK, with over a million jobs on offer. The UK has few working visa schemes with Albania, and most of these are available only for highly skilled job applicants. Sophisticated criminal networks in Albania have promoted crossing to the UK to access these jobs, targeting low-skilled workers travelling by small boats, advertised online at a cost of £2000–£5000 – significantly cheaper than other illegal migration routes, such as hiding in lorries / using fake documents (which typically cost between £12,000–£20,000).<sup>6</sup>

Approximately 40% of the Albanian population (1.4 million out of 3.5 million) have been living abroad since the fall of communism in 1991. Economic insecurity remains the primary cause; high living costs and low incomes have been important push factors for migration. However, additional critical aspects of the high migration levels for this country are its crony capitalism and unfair legal system – incentives to perpetual movement, losing Albania between 40,000 and 50,000 individuals to migration each year.<sup>7</sup>

Albania is classified as a hybrid democracy by Freedom House, receiving a score of 35 out of 100 on the Transparency International Corruption Index 2022. At the heart of the problem is that Albania has so far been unable to transform itself into a functional rule of law based democracy and liberal market economy, following the collapse of communism.<sup>8</sup> Instead, it has evolved into a crony capitalist system, where resources are allocated inefficiently and in ways that do not benefit society; big business is closely linked with political parties, or in some cases, with organised crime networks.<sup>9</sup> Rent-seeking behaviour has prioritized wealth creation for

the public good, civic institutions are undermined, and there are consistently high levels of inequality and corruption.<sup>10</sup>

Inequality is insufficiently studied in Albania, but it is clear that it has resulted in clientelist politics and widespread corruption, where political leaders establish themselves as monopoly providers of benefits for citizens and big business in which they are often the undisclosed owners, with little accountable scrutiny due to weak civic institutions.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, since the fall of communism, investment has primarily focused on metropolitan areas, in large infrastructure projects near Tirana and Durrës – the two major cities housing more than half of the current Albanian population – and very little on rural areas.<sup>12</sup> The beleaguered inhabitants of these underinvested areas represent the majority of those migrating to the UK.

Rose-Ackerman observes that corrupt officials spend too much money on large infrastructure projects where they can funnel contracts to their cronies, squeezing the funds available for investments in programmes such as education and human capital that benefit those at the bottom of the economic ladder.<sup>13</sup> As a result, nearly half of Albanians choose to migrate, in order to escape the constant poverty trap.<sup>14</sup> There is little incentive for the young Albanians to be optimistic about their future, let alone to believe that they are masters of their fate in their own country. Crony capitalism is not a uniquely Albanian phenomenon, and some variations exist everywhere, including within some EU member states. However, as young Albanians leave, urgent intuitional and social policy intervention is required to provide the conditions for those who want to develop their livelihoods in Albania.

Albania's rule of law is weak, and its judicial system is deeply corrupt. Despite the fact that the country is undergoing major reforms as a precondition to joining the EU, the judiciary has become a bulwark against arbitrary treatment, particularly with regard to property rights, where public authorities can confiscate and/or destroy people's possessions and properties with little notice and/or demand bribes to return them.<sup>15</sup> According to Ledeneva, without the rule of law, both the state and organised crime<sup>16</sup> are free to arbitrarily determine property rights<sup>17</sup> – there are numerous examples of this occurring in Albania, which explains the lack of foreign investment and why it has been unable to join the EU. Put simply, if people believe that the courts and public institutions have treated them unfairly, they are less likely to have faith in the legal system or incentive to stay in the country.

Albania's challenges are too many and too acute to ignore, and the list of necessary changes is long. These changes will not be achieved overnight, and they require sustained political will across the political spectrum. However, what is now urgent for Albania is structural reform, in particular a shift to an open market economy with a transparent decision-making process. The country must build a new social contract with its citizens, where young people can feel that they can fully participate in society based on merit, rather than political connections or corruption.

Secondly, Albania needs a levelling-up policy to reduce investment imbalances and diversify its economy to create job opportunities in rural areas, where the cost of living is prohibitively high. This economic remapping can reclaim the 'ghost towns' in much of the north and some of the south.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly – and most importantly – Albania's chronic inequality and corruption must be addressed, starting with investment in education. In their paper on social trust, Rothstein and Uslaner, argue that investing in social policies and particularly education, has allowed Sweden, Denmark, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea to reduce inequality and corruption.<sup>19</sup> We at University College London, Faculty of Laws, in close collaboration with the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the British Council, held a roundtable discussion with H.E. Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, and a number of leading British universities on strengthening ties between the UK and Albania through education, because we firmly believe that investing in high-quality education for young people, as well as student exchange programmes, will not only address some of the issues driving youth migration, but will also strengthen ties between the two countries.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, we believe that the best way to combat stereotypes formed for Albanians in the UK by anti-migrant political sentiments since the Brexit campaign – com-

“ **Albania's challenges are too many and too acute to ignore, and the list of necessary changes is long** ”

# There's a joke in Albania that if the country isn't allowed to enter the EU, it will join anyway – one person at a time

monly referring to Albanians as aggressive people and criminals – is to foster understanding and trust between the UK and Albania. That can be achieved by bringing people together, and collaboration in education can serve as a catalyst for addressing many of our common challenges.

The political and business elites must be convinced that dismantling crony capitalism and opening up to fair competition and meritocracy, supported by a fair justice system, will benefit all Albanians, including themselves. The opening of EU accession talks last year has the potential to disrupt the status quo and improve citizens' livelihoods not only in Albania, but throughout the Balkans, by allowing them to join the European Single Market.<sup>21</sup> Consistently postponing Albania's further integration into Europe is provides a significant disincentive to those who wish to return from abroad. Access to the European Single Market, even in the absence of full membership, may help to mitigate the primary causes of mass migration from a nation of 3.5 million people.

According to Eurostat, about 800,000 Albanians became citizens in an EU country between 2008–2020.<sup>22</sup> There's a joke in Albania that if the country isn't allowed to enter the EU, it will join anyway – one person at a time – and so far, nearly a third of the population is on its way to achieving this. However, if the country is re-

formed and allowed to join the European Single Market first, and eventually the Union, and citizens feel they can shape the country's future, many individual Albanians may prefer to stay within their borders as part of a functioning, productive, and equitable future EU Member State.

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# OP-ED

# FORTIFYING EUROPE



## Nidžara Ahmetašević

Nidžara Ahmetasevic is a freelance journalist and an independent researcher from Sarajevo. Her work focuses on different aspects of human rights violations, including war crimes and hate speech. Since 2015, she has been active in the field of migration as a journalist, researcher, and activist following the Balkan Route.

## ● KEY TAKEAWAYS

The article focuses on the closure of the Balkan Route and the normalisation of the violence against migrants at the EU borders. The EU, perceived by many as a safe haven, became an impenetrable fortress that, to keep up the walls that surround it, uses many forms of violence against people who are searching for peace and the opportunity to live.

In the winter and spring of 2015/2016, over 10,000 people were stuck near Idomeni, a small Greek village at the border with North Macedonia. People were living in a makeshift camp between rail tracks in indescribable conditions. Numerous organisations and individuals tried to provide much-needed assistance, but each new day was more difficult than the last. Yet the people who were stuck in that place, surrounded by strong police forces, kept hoping that they would wake up to an open border, allowing them to continue their journey and their life. Even today, on a big metal board in Idomeni, “Hope” is scrawled in graffiti left from that winter.

Just a few months before this bottleneck was created in Idomeni, the borders had been open. Or rather, there was a humanitarian corridor that allowed people from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to move more easily through both EU and Western Balkan countries. The corridor was opened after former German Chancellor Angela Merkel pronounced the famous words: “We can do this!” (“wir schaffen das”), under the pressure of the public and a huge number of people who were on their way to Europe.

People were arriving daily to the islands of Greece, where they continued on to Athens and Thessaloniki, crossing to North Macedonia, which issued a document allowing them to stay 72 hours and apply for asylum if they wanted. Faced with clear poverty and instability, most migrants continued toward the Serbian border town of Preševo, where buses and trains took them toward Hungary and Croatia. For a time, everyone felt hope, and the EU seemed to be the union imagined by those who created it, a safe haven where human rights and lives are a priority. But soon, the entire world, especially people in Idomeni, discovered that that notion is just a utopian dream accessible only to some people. For others, it became a nightmare, surrounded by wires and walls, the border protected by the police. An impenetrable fortress.

The first walls and barbed wires were put up at the Hungarian and Slovenian borders. In Hungary, the wall was protected by police officers with dogs. The EU sent a signal to North Macedonia to close the borders in the winter, and as a country hoping to one day become a member and in need of different kinds of help, they obeyed.

Then, in March 2016, the EU reached an agreement with Turkey about preventing people from boarding small boats and going toward Greece, in exchange for a visa-free regime for Turkey and more money from various EU funds. In September 2016, Merkel announced that Germany would end its open-door policy and that she would stop using the phrase “wir schaffen das”: “I sometimes think this phrase was a little overstated, that too much store was set by it – to the extent that I’d prefer not to repeat it. It’s become a simple slogan, an almost meaningless formula,” she said.

### Creating “hell on earth”

Sometime in May 2016, the Greek police started evacuating people from Idomeni, pushing them back towards camps that were created all over the country. They were often set up in faraway places, old factories, and decommissioned airports, in fields or mountain areas, away from other people, and hard to reach for the media or volunteers. In most cases, people in these camps were only given tents to live in. Living conditions in these camps were poor, sometimes worse than in Idomeni, and freedoms were limited to the level many said they preferred make-shift camps. The aim of this policy appeared to be to send a message to all would-be migrants to stay home. If they did come, what awaited them were camps where people were criminalized and deprived of basic rights. Some of them, like Moria on Lesbos, were described as “hell on earth” by residents, as well as media and the broad public.

While the last people were being pushed toward camps from the area around Idomeni in June 2016, I arrived in Greece for the first time as a volunteer, joining people from all over the world. I was part of a group formed in Zagreb, Croatia, ironically called *Are You Syrious?* Our main focus in the Balkans was not to provide charity and short-term assistance. Many of us were war survivors and former refugees, and well aware that short-term help does not make sense or bring about change. Our focus became the collection and distribution of information about what is happening on the migration routes in Europe. With a huge network of people from all over the world, including those who were on the move at the moment, we were able to collect intel and check what was happening on the ground. We believed in the power of information, truth, people, and solidarity.

# Being a migrant became a term with negative connotations, used by politicians in different countries, but also some media

In September 2015, we began publishing a Daily Digest through our Facebook group. At some point, with no paid advertisement, and based exclusively on work by volunteers, we managed to have a daily reach of over 600,000, were quoted by the media and followed by key actors in the field, from big organisations and government to small activists and volunteer groups, and most importantly, people on the move.

With the intention to see what was happening after the closure of the borders, we started the journey from Zagreb, going to Belgrade, Skopje, and down to Idomeni and Thessaloniki, meeting people who were walking by the roads, hiding from the police, and trying to reach one of the EU borders and cross. Finally, we arrived at Idomeni to see the last groups of people being forcefully removed from the places where they had been for months. Some of them ran away to nearby forests and half-deserted villages, were chased by the police, and forced to go to camps, from where they usually ran again. Thessaloniki was the main hub where people used to gather and at times, over 600 people would spend the night near the train station. In the night, many headed toward the border trying to cross and coming back in the morning if pushed back by the police.

While authorities tried to remove them almost daily, large organisations ignored them, but local people and

international volunteers were there providing basic assistance. Sometimes, unable to do anything else, we spent hours sitting on the ground with people, talking and hoping that soon the nightmare would be over - for us and them.

## A new vocabulary of violence

Over the past seven years, more walls have been built, violence against migrants all over Europe has become normalised, and migration is increasingly criminalised. According to available data, since 2015, around the world, more than 63 walls, fences, or other physical barriers are installed in different borders. Along the EU's external borders alone between 2014 and 2022, border fences grew from 315 km to 2.048 km. More are being constructed, and some existing ones are extended all the time.

Being a migrant became a term with negative connotations, used by politicians in different countries, but also some media. Both connect migration with security-related issues including the threat of terrorism. New words entered our vocabularies in different languages, such as the "game" - the attempt to cross borders irregularly, or "push-back" - an act of violence committed by the border police while preventing people to seek asylum. Media also often focus on semantic distinctions - discussing who ought to be called a migrant, a refugee, who has the right to asylum, and so on.

These seven years were used by governments and the EU to introduce “migration management”. Under this new term, which has not been well defined as a new policy, new strict rules and regulations were introduced in different countries. More and more money each year is dedicated to strengthening police forces all over Europe, all in order to enhance “migration management”. The improvement of “migration management” became the precondition for countries who are seeking help from the EU or hoping to become members. The Western Balkans is just one of the regions where IPA funds, dedicated to the development of the country, are used to enhance border security and to stop migration toward the EU. For this purpose, from 2021 to February 2023, EUR 201.7 million were directed for the border management for the Balkans, and more is promised from the EC for 2023 and 2024.

Since 2018, I have been closely following the development of “migration management” in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and neighbouring countries as a journalist and activist. Due to the weak state structure, lack of the rule of law, and the fact that BiH remains a semi-protectorate 30 years since the end of the war, the issue was placed under the control of the EU and their partners, primarily the International Organisation for Migrations (IOM). Under the pretext of strengthening “migration management”, camps were created where living conditions are as poor as those in Greek camps in 2016 (but also today). Access to these places remains limited for the media and researchers, and those who work or reside inside are restricted from taking pictures or sharing information about what is happening behind the fences. People forced to live in these camps have complained about different forms of violence and negligence, including sexual violence and cases of rape even of minors, claims are rarely addressed by those who are responsible.

After attempting to leave BiH on foot, people continue towards Croatia, walking for days through forests and over mountains, while being chased by border guards who are now equipped with a modern surveillance system, one of the characteristics of “migration management”.

Over the last seven years, the EU has diverted from democracy and the ideals engraved in its founding documents. In 2012, the EU received the Nobel Peace Prize

for the “successful struggle for peace and reconciliation and for democracy and human rights.” In 2023, following a story about the massive expulsions from Croatia to BiH, and the secret plans for mass deportations from the Balkans to countries of origin, this is so ironic that it sounds like a joke. A bad one, for sure.

# POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

## OVERVIEW

This section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis and understanding of human security, which includes structural sources of conflict such as social tensions brought about by unfinished democratization, social or economic in-

equalities or ecological challenges, for instance. The briefings cover fourteen countries in Southeast Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

## CONFLICT AND ENERGY

On the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion on February 24, countries across the region reaffirmed their support to Ukraine. The diversification of energy sources continued. In December 2022, Romania joined Hungary in signing an agreement on laying an underwater electric cable under the Black Sea to provide Azerbaijani energy to Europe. In February 2023, Bulgaria and Greece signed agreements on gas supply and storage, as well as the possible construction of a new oil pipeline. The security architecture of Europe also continued to develop with Finland officially joining NATO on April 4. Turkey continues to block Sweden due to disagreements over the extradition of Turkish citizens.

Moldova, directly bordering Ukraine, remained the most fragile in terms of security. In February, President Maia Sandu alleged that there was a plan from Moscow involving the citizens of Russia, Montenegro, Belarus and Serbia entering the country to initiate protests to “change the legitimate government”. Officials of Serbia and Montenegro stated that they do not have such information and requested clarification. Later the same month, Russian President Vladimir Putin cancelled a 2012 decree regarding Russia’s foreign policy, which includes Moscow’s position on the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova. In March, the Moldovan Defense Minister stated there was no imminent military danger coming from Russia.

A building damaged by deadly earthquakes in Gaziantep, Turkey;  
Source: European Commission



Meanwhile, the pro-Western government of Moldova led by Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita resigned on February 10 amid economic turmoil and the consequences of the war in Ukraine. President Sandu accepted Gavrilita’s decision and nominated her defense adviser Dorin Recean to be prime minister. The new government maintained the pro-Western course, while several thousands of citizens protested against its inauguration on February 19 and demanded the resignation of Sandu due to rising utility bills. Many protesters were linked to the Russia-friendly Shor Party.

## TRAGEDIES STRIKE TURKEY AND GREECE AS BOTH ENTER ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

On February 6, 2023, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern and central Turkey and northern and western Syria. It left widespread damage, more than 50,000 fatalities in Turkey and more than 7,000 in Syria. In the immediate aftermath, thousands were trapped under rubble when buildings collapsed. Tens of thousands of people across the region were left homeless and spent the night in cold weather.

On February 9, after touring the affected city of Gaziantep, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promised to rebuild destroyed homes of survivors within one year. He also said the government is working on temporary accommodation for those made homeless. Additionally, at least 105 countries and 16 international organizations pledged support for victims of the earthquake, including humanitarian aid. As of March, over 300 people have been arrested for “provocative” social media posts, as well as construction wrongdoings, which contributed to the collapse of infrastructure during the disaster.

Even though there was speculation about whether the general election date, May 14, will be changed after the earthquake, the authorities ultimately decided to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on that day. The polls, as well as recent political developments, indicate that this might be the first realistic opportunity for the opposition to end Erdoğan’s 20-year rule of the country, which saw it shift towards increasing authoritarianism. In March, after months of negotiations, an alliance of six

Turkish opposition parties agreed on the joint presidential candidate, the leader of the social-democratic CHP party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. A 74-year-old career public servant, Kılıçdaroğlu has been the leader of the opposition in Turkey since 2010. Before his nomination, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, popular mayors of Turkey's two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara, were also mentioned as potential candidates; Kılıçdaroğlu pledged to make them vice presidents in case of victory.

Several weeks after the earthquake in Turkey, Greece also suffered a tragedy when a head-on collision occurred between two trains in the northern part of the country. The collision, involving the passenger train and an intermodal freight train, killed at least 57 people, many of them students returning from Athens to Thessaloniki. It was the worst railway accident in Greek history.

The immediate responsibility for the tragedy was attributed to a station master in Larissa, who was arrested and charged with negligence. However, the railway operator, Hellenic Railways, was deemed responsible of having a shortage of personnel, while the government has repeatedly ignored calls by railway unions to install and maintain digital safety systems and hire more staff. On March 8, tens of thousands rallied outside Parliament in Athens, the northern city of Thessaloniki and other cities across Greece in the largest street demonstrations the New Democracy government has faced since being elected in 2019.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis set the date for regular parliamentary election for May 21. He previously apologized for the train crash, promising to fix long-standing deficiencies in the railway sector and to provide financial support for victims' families. The lead of the New Democracy in the polls has since narrowed, and it is expected that no single party will have the majority to form the next government.

Earlier in the year, the government survived a no-confidence vote put forward by the left-wing opposition over the surveillance scandal which was uncovered in the summer of 2022. Allegations of state surveillance of more than 30 people have snowballed since the leader of the socialist PASOK party, said last August that his phone had been tapped by the state intelligence service

EYP in 2021. Leader of the opposition SYRIZA Alexis Tsipras accused Mitsotakis of orchestrating the surveillance, which the Prime Minister denied it. In December, Parliament passed a bill reforming EYP and banning the sale of spyware.

In Albania, Prime Minister Edi Rama also had to fend off scandalous allegations of murky ties with a foreign intelligence agent. The retired FBI senior official Charles F. McGonigal was arrested in January on charges of violating American sanctions by secretly working for a Kremlin-linked Russian oligarch he once investigated. He is also accused of receiving at least \$225,000 in cash from a former Albanian intelligence officer in exchange for promoting his business interests. Rama admitted that he had also met with McGonigal on several occasions, but denied any involvement in the case for which he is charged. On the other hand, opposition parties called for full investigation in both Albania and the United State and included the story in their arsenal of attacks against the Socialist Party ahead of local elections in May.

## VUČIĆ AND KURTI REACH AN AGREEMENT, IMPACT STILL HARD TO ASSESS

Following a series of tensions throughout 2022, yet another escalation took place between Serbia and Kosovo in December. After the arrest of Dejan Pantić, a Kosovo Serb who was a former member of the Kosovo police, accused of obstructing the conduct of extraordinary local elections, Serbs from the north of Kosovo again set up roadblocks, while officials in Belgrade put the army in 'full combat readiness'. Tensions lasted for several weeks

Albin Kurti and Aleksadnar Vučić meeting in Ohrid, North Macedonia, on March 18, 2023, in the presence of Miroslav Lajčák and Josep Borrell; Source: European Commission



and subsided after the court's decision at the end of December to release Pantić to house arrest, whereupon the barricades were removed.

Only a couple of months later, however, the two sides were apparently making progress in the EU-mediated Dialogue, agreeing on February 27 to accept, without further modifications, an "Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia", which was based on the Franco-German proposal presented to the sides earlier in 2022. The European Union formally endorsed the proposal before it was accepted, verbally, by President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti.

According to the Agreement, both parties shall mutually recognize their respective documents and national symbols, including passports, diplomas, licence plates, and customs stamps. Crucially, according to Article 4, Serbia will not object to Kosovo's membership in any international organization, while, according to Article 7, parties agreed to ensure an appropriate level of self-management for the Serbian community in Kosovo and formalize the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Several weeks later on March 18, an implementation annex to the agreement was agreed upon by the two sides in Ohrid, North Macedonia. Kosovo was obliged to immediately launch negotiations within the EU-facilitated Dialogue on establishing specific arrangements and guarantees to ensure the self-management for the Serbian community in Kosovo. Vučić and Kurti did not sign the agreement nor the annex, which were instead incorporated into their respective EU accession processes.

As of April 2023, it is still early to tell whether the agreed documents will produce significant consequences, with some analysts assessing them as too modest and just a means for the EU to maintain some stability in the region in the wake of the war in Ukraine. The agreement is clearly interim in nature and only one step towards the still elusive goal of a comprehensive normalization deal between the two sides.

Even in such circumstances, the acceptance of any concessions is seen as a political challenge on both sides. In January, Vučić held a press conference in Serbia fol-

lowing a meeting with representatives of the EU and the United States. He stressed that Serbia would be facing dire economic consequences, including the withdrawal of foreign investments, if it failed to cooperate on this deal. Meanwhile, nationalist opposition organized a rally against the agreement on March 17 and announced further activities, though thus far it does not seem they were very successful in destabilizing Vučić.

In Kosovo, speaker of the Parliament Glauk Konjufca declared that the country received strong international guarantees that no third level of power will be created with the Association of Municipalities with a Serbian Majority. Opposition parties stated they were against the formation of the Association, and stressed that the current Prime Minister Kurti was also against it while in opposition. Tensions also continued in the north, with the dominant Serb List party announcing a boycott of the upcoming snap local elections.

## END OF AN ERA IN MONTENEGRO

On April 2, 2023, citizens of Montenegro elected 36-year-old economist Jakov Milatović as the country's third president since independence. Milatović defeated the incumbent President Milo Đukanović by a large margin, ending the latter's virtually uninterrupted period of 34 years at the helm of Montenegrin politics.

Đukanović, who won the plurality of votes in the first round of the elections but was unable to muster enough support for the runoff, conceded defeat and subsequently announced his resignation as the leader of

**New President of Montenegro Jakov Milatović during election campaign**  
Source: Jakov Milatović official Facebook page



Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which ruled the country from 1990 to 2020. Under Đukanović's leadership, Montenegro became an independent state in 2006 and then turned decisively towards the West, joining NATO in 2017. Đukanović's legacy, however, also includes persistent accusations of corruption, polarization and authoritarianism.

Montenegro's new president Jakov Milatović, who will take over from Đukanović on May 20, is a relative newcomer to politics, serving in the "expert" government of Zdravko Krivokapić from 2020 to 2022 as Minister for Economic Development. Following the fall of the government, Milatović co-founded the political movement "Europe Now" with former Minister of Finance Miloško Spajić. Spajić was the movement's original candidate for president but he was disqualified for having residency in Serbia. Milatović, who was supported by a wide coalition of forces who opposed Đukanović's rule for years, including pro-Serbian Democratic Front, declared Montenegro joining the EU as soon as possible as one of his main goals, and announced no major changes in the country's foreign policy orientation.

The re-consolidation of the Montenegrin political scene, however, is expected to continue in a couple of months, as Đukanović in one of his last acts as President before the election, dissolved the deadlocked parliament in March. Snap parliamentary elections will take place on June 11. The momentum seems to be with Spajić's and Milatović's "Europe Now", and the elections might lead to the stabilization of the political scene which remained highly fragmented since DPS first lost power in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The outgoing parliament finally started to appoint new Supreme Court Justices in February, unblocking the work of this institution.

On the same day that Montenegro held its presidential election runoff, Bulgarian citizens went to the polls for an unprecedented fifth time in two years, following three inconclusive elections in 2021 and an additional one in October 2022. Since none of the parties were able to form a majority in the parliament, President Rumen Radev dissolved it for the fifth time, but the new election did not return any clearer of a majority. GERB, the party of the controversial Prime Minister former Boyko Borisov, won 26.5% of the vote, closely followed by the coa-

lition of reformist parties "We continue the change" and Democratic Bulgaria with 24.6%. As third place was won by far-right Revival, no stable majority can be achieved without the cooperation of GERB and the reformist parties, which have so far refused.

A new president was also elected in Cyprus. On February 12, former Foreign Minister Nikos Christodoulides defeated another former diplomat, Andreas Mavroyiannis, in a tight election runoff (52-48). From 2018 to 2022, Christodoulides served as Foreign Minister in the cabinet of his predecessor, Nicos Anastasiades. He resigned in order to run in for president, and was backed by the opposition center-left DIKO and several other parties. Mavroyiannis, on the other hand, was backed by left-wing AKEL, while the candidate of the Anastasiades's DISY party finished the race in the third place. The results were generally described as a disappointment for the traditional parties.

Christodoulides assumed office on February 28, stating that finding solutions to solve the problem of divided Cyprus would be the absolute priority of his administration. During his inauguration speech, he mentioned the first informal meeting with Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar and the position he conveyed to him that the current status quo cannot be the solution to the Cyprus problem.

During his first participation in the meeting of the European Council in Brussels, Christodoulides presented the idea of an EU envoy for the Cyprus talks to the heads of the EU Commission, Council and Parliament, as well as the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. More active EU involvement was seen "as a positive development to break the deadlock and move forward in resolving the Cyprus problem," Christodoulides said. However, some commentators were cautious about his ability to make a breakthrough on this issue, assessing that the Turkish Cypriot community regards him with distrust due to his participation in Anastasiades's cabinet and support from parties which hold a hard line towards the resolution of the issue.

Earlier, in January, UN Security Council extend the mandate of the UNFICYP peacekeeping force for another year, underlining its concern over continued violations of the military status quo on the Mediterranean



**Inauguration of the new President of Cyprus Nikos Christodoulides, February 28, 2023**

Source: President of Cyprus

island. The report of the UN secretary general highlighted the widening gulf and divisive narratives of the two sides, offering a generally pessimistic outlook for a quick settlement.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the formation of new institutions proceeded following the October 2022 general election. On December 22, Borjana Krišto, a Vice President of Croat HDZ BiH party and a close ally of the party's leader Dragan Čović, was appointed the new Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of BiH. The new Council was supported by a small majority of 23 out of 42 members of the House of Representatives of BiH. The Serb SNSD party and the HDZ previously reached a coalition agreement with moderate Bosniak parties, excluding the Bosniak nationalist SDA party from power for the first time.

Meanwhile, the upper house of the Federation of BiH, one of the country's two entities, was constituted on January 17. Following last year's controversial decision of the High Representative Christian Schmidt, this institution now has a new membership structure. On February 28, Lidija Bradara, member of the HDZ party, was elected as the new President of the Federation of BiH. The formation of the entity government, however, has proven to be a challenge and has not been completed as of April.

In the country's other entity, Republika Srpska, Serb nationalist leader Milorad Dodik continued his clash with the West. On January 8, Dodik awarded Russian Presi-

dent Vladimir Putin with the Order of Republika Srpska. Both this act and the holding of the Republika Srpska Day on January 9, which the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina has declared unconstitutional, were condemned by representatives of the European Union and the United States.

The EU and the US condemned several pieces of legislation adopted by the new Assembly of Republika Srpska, including the Law on Immovable Property of Republika Srpska, which was also declared unconstitutional, as well as amendments to the Criminal Code, which introduced a new chapter on crimes "against honor and reputation". Journalists raised concerns about the new laws, which were seen as limiting free expression under the guise of anti-defamation. United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Dodik of being "on President Putin's authoritarian path" in a Twitter post. RS leadership also blocked the ratification of the agreement which would enable travel among Western Balkan countries using only ID cards, due to their refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence.

## CROATIA ENTERS SCHENGEN AND EUROZONE

More than 30 years after Croatia and Slovenia broke away from Yugoslavia, their citizens are now once again using the same currency and can cross the border freely, as Croatia entered the Euro and Schengen area on January 1, 2023. To celebrate the occasion, newly elected Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar met with Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in the now defunct border crossing of Obrežje.

**Nataša Pirc Musar, Ursula von der Leyen and Andrej Plenković mark Croatia's entry to Schengen area at Slovenia-Croatia border**

Source: Government of Croatia



By entering Schengen, Croatia leapfrogged Romania and Bulgaria, which became EU members six years earlier, but still remain outside the free movement area. In December 2022, Austria blocked Bulgaria and Romania from joining Schengen. At the time, Austrian observers attributed Vienna's veto to the upcoming regional elections in Lower Austria, the ruling conservative ÖVP's heartland. The Austrian member of the European Commission, Johannes Hahn, stated in January that he expected Vienna to lift its veto against Bulgaria and Romania's Schengen accession in due time.

Romania, which was featured in the international news recently due to the imprisonment and subsequent release to house arrest of former kickboxer and Internet personality Andrew Tate, accused of human trafficking, has put entry to Schengen and support to Moldova as its foreign policy priorities in 2023. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, while on a visit to Bucharest in April, also stated that he would like to see Romania and Bulgaria join the area this year.

In Slovenia, Prime Minister Robert Golob completed a government reshuffle by the end of January, creating three new ministries – the Ministry of a Solidarity-Based Future, tasked with a long-term housing policy,

the Ministry of Education, and the Climate and Energy Ministry. The government now has twenty ministers, just as Golob envisioned at the outset of his term, but had to wait for the results of a referendum held last November, which was scheduled by the previous government of Janez Janša. The citizens voted against Janša's government initiative to repeal laws on ministries, as well as governing bodies of RTV Slovenia, the public broadcaster, whose changes of personnel during the previous administration caused much controversy.

North Macedonia saw a government reshuffle as an ethnic Albanian Party, the Alliance for Albanians, joined the ruling majority in February. The Alliance's eight deputies were expected to increase the majority to 72 out of 120 seats. The agreement was made in the context of government's struggles to muster a two-thirds majority of more than 80 MPs to pass a key constitutional change that would list Bulgarians among the state's founding peoples, a requirement for the continuation of its EU path. However, the entry of the Alliance of Albanians to the government was followed by the exit of another Albanian party – Alternative. Ultimately, the support for the government increased by only one vote, after several other MPs also withdrew their support.



OP-ED

# AN IMMORAL AND INHUMAN MIGRATION POLICY: FROM INHUMAN LEGISLATION TO STATE CRIMES



## Alkistis Agrafioti Chatzigianni

Alkistis Agrafioti Chatzigianni is a lawyer and advocacy officer at the Greek Council for Refugees, a legal aid non-governmental organization in Greece. She has been living and working on the Eastern Aegean Islands of Samos and Lesbos at the Greek-Turkish borders for the last four years.

## ● KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The main aspects of Greece's migration and border policy are deterrence, the implementation of inhuman legislation, and illegal practices and state crimes.
- The article shares the policies' results by sharing firsthand experiences from the field of the Eastern Aegean Islands at the Greek-Turkish borders and it demonstrates the significance of the unimpeded work of human rights defenders and access to justice.

## The Greek state has been trying hard to exclude people entitled to international protection from receiving asylum

They say not everything moral is legal and not everything legal is moral. A migration and border policy that punishes the most innocent and in need of protection and normalizes violence and death is both immoral and illegal, and this is what is happening in Greece at the EU's external borders.

The context of Greece's migration policy is one of very limited legal certainty. Laws and the ways they are applied (or not) have changed constantly and brazenly in order to follow political directions, which systematically punishes people in search for international protection, along with those who support them. The Greek state has been trying hard to exclude people entitled to international protection from receiving asylum in Greece and/or, in any case, make their life unbearable.

In June 2021, the issuance of a Joint Ministerial Decision designating Turkey as a *safe third country* for five nationalities that represented the majority of asylum applications in Greece (Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan and Bangladesh) unexpectedly worsened the impact of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.<sup>1</sup> Namely, the Decision expanded the use of admissibility procedures, prior only applied to Syrians following the EU-Turkey Deal, to all five above-mentioned nationalities. Since then, Greece can deny examining asylum applications on their merits (based on applicants' individual circumstances and the risks they face in their country of origin), reject them as inadmissible, and issue a decision to return asylum appli-

cants of the above nationalities to Turkey. Unsurprisingly, the Decision resulted in a sharp increase in inadmissibility decisions based on the safe third country concept, rising from 2,839 in 2020 to 6,424 in 2021.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, the Greek Asylum Service dismissed 3,445 asylum applications as inadmissible based on the consideration of Turkey as a safe third country, the majority of them from Afghans and Syrians, including dozens of Palestinians with previous habitual residence Syria.<sup>3</sup> The Decision has evidently been issued as part of the broader deterrence policy put forward by Greece and the EU, as seen with the EU-Turkey Deal, to dismantle the obligations of Greece and the EU to provide international protection and safety to people in need.

In parallel, since at least March 2020, Turkey has been refusing the return of asylum seekers rejected by the Greek authorities, under the pretext of COVID.<sup>4</sup> As a result, asylum seekers whose application has been rejected and whose return to Turkey is impossible due to the suspension of readmissions, remain in Greece, in indefinite legal limbo, without access to reception conditions and health care and under or in risk of detention. Indeed, in the last years, thousands of people have been stacked for months or even year(s) in Greece's pre-removal detention centers or in inhuman and degrading conditions in camps on the Greek islands. This is the result of the EU Turkey Deal, which not only has been a complete failure but also has turned asylum seekers into pawns and victims of the political games of EU and Turkey.

# Someone would expect that we could be at least happy with those who are granted refugee status in Greece

The latest developments of this inhuman migration policy are the new EU funded prison-like migration centers (known as “Closed Controlled Access Centers”, CCACs), camouflaged as modern accommodation facilities to replace the “hotspots” on the Eastern Aegean Islands that resulted from the EU-Turkey Deal.<sup>5</sup> One visit and talk with a resident from one of these centers would be revealing for every European citizen to understand the traumatizing “experiments” that the European Commission is funding in Greece. I did not feel particularly proud to be a European citizen when during a mission to Samos in December 2021 I met and talked with a young Afghan man who resorted to self-harm. He had been transferred from the Samos camp known by refugees as “the jungle” to the new isolated center almost 3 years upon his arrival in Greece, living in inhuman and degrading conditions, and was one of the victims of an arbitrary prohibition of exit applied by the administration.<sup>6</sup> The local Administrative Court ruled that this prohibition was an illegal de facto detention measure.<sup>7</sup> However, up to now those entering Greece in search for international protection, including children and vulnerable people, have been detained upon their arrival for almost one month without access to legal aid and basic rights.

Moreover, the lack of access to medical care and safe accommodation for our clients is harrowing for all of us working in the field of asylum in Greece. One of the most traumatic experiences for me was in Samos in 2020, during a legal counseling session with a single woman whose asylum application had been rejected. While checking her documents, I found a two-month-old medical report not-

ing an eight-month pregnancy. When I asked her where her baby was, she told me that she gave birth to a dead baby in the camp where she was living, as she had no help and no access to medical care. At that time, there were thousands of people living in makeshift tents in the camp known as “the jungle” and just one doctor. None of them could have direct access to the General Hospital of Samos. That woman, during her pregnancy, managed to see a gynecologist only once – when she was eight months pregnant. Today, three years later, the General Hospital of Samos remains understaffed and the medical unit of the new EU funded migration center has no doctor.<sup>8</sup>

Someone would expect that we could be at least happy with those who are granted refugee status in Greece. One of the most tragic cases I encountered in 2021 was a Syrian man who had refugee status and was suffering from severe psychiatric problems. He had returned to Lesbos to be homeless after being evicted by an accommodation facility for vulnerable asylum applicants in Athens. In 2023, we reported on the case of a Palestinian refugee legally residing in Kos, who was kidnapped by the Greek authorities while he was walking to the hotel where he was working, arbitrarily detained, sexually assaulted, and pushed back into Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

Seeing the cruelty these people face in your own European country is outrageous and depressing. In recent years, some of the biggest crimes in Greece are the illegal and violent pushback operations, systematically conducted by the Greek authorities.<sup>10</sup> Despite the overwhelming number of documented pushbacks and the use of deadly

migration routes to avoid them, there has been no judicial response at a national level beyond few sporadic investigations, initiated after complaints filed by civil society organizations.<sup>11</sup>

### Human rights defenders on the front lines

The burden falls rather on human rights defenders to stop these crimes, but their work is not unimpeded.<sup>12</sup> People and organizations that denounce these illegal practices and support pushback victims find themselves often intimidated, targeted and criminalized. The NGO I work with is being harshly targeted by government officials as an enemy of the state harming national security.<sup>13</sup> The Greek mass media tend to reproduce the government's narrative, which becomes dominant in the public discourse, making it extremely difficult for activists, lawyers, and people in solidarity to defend ourselves. Legal assistance is under attack and this obstructs victims from access to justice and redress for violations against them.

The Greek state is not alone in this inhuman, violent and illegal policy that it implements. On the contrary, it is encouraged to continue as such by other member states who use similar practices. It is also abetted by the European Union that not only turns a blind eye to the crimes occurring at its borders, but also clearly prioritizes the so-called "protection of its borders" at the cost of the lives, health, and safety of hundreds of people. This policy is criminal, with systemic racism embedded within it, and there should be zero tolerance for these state organized crimes. A judicial response at the national and international levels is immediately required in order to end these atrocities, and every one of us should call for justice and support those in need in any way possible.

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