

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY ON THE BALKAN ROUTE SINCE 2015: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

Sümeyye Açıkgoz

International Balkan University, North Macedonia, sumeyye.acikgoz@ibu.edu.mk

Abstract: Since the 2015–2016 migration crisis, the Balkan Route has been reshaped through overlapping policy responses, institutional arrangements, and evolving governance practices. However, these changes have not resulted in a stable or coherent system. On the contrary, the region reflects a more complex reality where new approaches to migration management coexist with previous patterns that are difficult to replace. In the post-crisis period, the European Union's migration policies have increasingly shifted toward externalization; control mechanisms have been extended beyond EU borders, and the role of Western Balkan countries has been redefined. As a result, transit countries have adopted more restrictive migration measures, strengthened border management practices, and aligned certain legal and administrative frameworks with EU expectations. These developments signal a distinct transformation in how migration is managed, particularly regarding control, surveillance, and institutional coordination.

Nevertheless, elements of continuity remain visible in day-to-day governance practices. Across the region, migration management often relies on temporary arrangements, informal coordination, and reactive decision-making processes rather than long-term institutional planning. Practices such as pushbacks, selective access to protection, and the inconsistent application of asylum procedures highlight the gap between official policy frameworks and on-the-ground implementation. This gap is not accidental; it reflects deeper structural limitations within the migration governance system.

This study adopts a qualitative and concept-driven approach, drawing on policy documents, regional agreements, and institutional practices in the key countries along the Balkan Route: Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather than treating change as a linear process, the study assesses the Balkan Route as a layered governance space shaped by both transformation and persistence. The analysis reveals that recent policy changes have primarily affected the formal structure of migration governance, while existing practices continue to determine how these policies are implemented on the ground. This simultaneity creates a fragmented policy environment and raises significant questions regarding consistency, accountability, and the protection of migrant rights. More broadly, the study contributes to discussions on how knowledge regarding migration governance is produced and translated into policy, particularly in regions where institutional capacities and political priorities do not develop at the same level.

Keywords: Balkan Route, migration governance, change and continuity, policy transformation, EU externalization

1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans stand out within European migration movements due to their history, geographical location, and political fragility. The region has been marked by wars, forced displacements, ethnic conflicts, and cross-border mobility at various times. Migration in this region has evolved into a multi-layered process that influences social order, identity relations, and state policies. Although the Balkan geography encompasses a limited area, its evaluation alongside historical experiences of conflict and migration demonstrates that human mobility is a persistent phenomenon in the region (Akova, 2012). The migration of the Turkish and Muslim population formed in the region since the Ottoman period toward Turkey due to subsequent political transformations, security concerns, and pressures reveals that migration movements in the Western Balkans carry not only demographic but also cultural, historical, and political significance (Özbadem and Ertan, 2022). From Turkey's perspective, the region's role as a gateway to Europe, its shared historical past, the presence of related and ethnic communities, and its strategic location make migration processes in the Western Balkans closely intertwined with Turkey's regional policies (Canveren, 2023).

The Western Balkans' pivotal role in migration became particularly evident during the wars and mass displacements of the 1990s. The wars, ethnic divisions, and political instability during the dissolution of Yugoslavia triggered large-scale population movements in the region. This period demonstrates that the Western Balkans became an area directly associated with forced migration, refugeehood, cross-border mobility, and humanitarian crises. Political fragilities inherited from the 1990s, incomplete administrative and economic transformations, limited institutional capacity, and security-centric state reflexes continue to influence current debates on migration management (Meç, 2016).

At the current juncture, the Western Balkans have emerged as a critical transit region for irregular migration flows heading toward Europe. Forced migration movements originating from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and other conflict zones have brought issues of border management, security, and asylum capacity to the forefront of the European Union's migration policies (Estevens, 2018). In 2015, 1,822,337 irregular border crossings were recorded at the European Union's external borders; 885,386 of these occurred along the Eastern Mediterranean route stretching from Turkey to Greece (Eurostat, 2017). The fact that asylum applications reached 1,257,000 in the same year has led to migration debates in Europe being largely shaped by "crisis" rhetoric (Eurostat, 2021). Greece's lack of a land border with Schengen countries has increased the number of migrants seeking to reach Europe by traveling through countries such as Serbia, North Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia; the Western Balkan route has become one of the most visible pathways for irregular migration (Erdoğan, 2021).

A lower perceived risk compared to the Mediterranean route, shorter distances, the presence of land and rail connections, deficiencies in border control capacity, limited cooperation between countries, and the effectiveness of human trafficking networks all contribute to the importance of this route (Tuntevski, Tosheva, and Kechegi, 2020). Nevertheless, the route cannot be considered a single, fixed, or unchanging path. Intensified border controls, the blocking of crossings, or increased security measures in certain countries lead to migration movements shifting toward other routes. Countries such as Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are becoming more vulnerable to migration pressure as new transit routes emerge (Erdoğan, 2021). The Western Balkans constitute a sensitive migration governance area where issues such as irregular migration, border management, readmission, asylum capacity, and the fight against human trafficking intersect.

The fragmented and inconsistent nature of migration policies in the region is linked to the difficulty Western Balkan countries face in developing a common regional approach. During the 2015 refugee crisis, many countries stepped up border controls; in some areas, strict security measures, practices that restrict humanitarian aid, and regulations that hinder crossings have come to the fore (Amnesty International, 2017). Unilateral policies are leading migrants to turn to neighboring countries where they can cross more easily; the fortification of borders, meanwhile, is turning into a sort of arms race among countries (Jureković, 2016). The inadequacy of reception centers, deficiencies in registration capacity, limited financial resources, and differences in the process of aligning with the European Union also hinder the development of a common migration management framework (Meç, 2016). The fact that program documents for the 2025–2030 period highlight the need for support in the Western Balkans in areas such as capacity building for safe, orderly, and rights-based migration management, integrated border management, strengthening asylum systems, access to the labor market, and combating human trafficking demonstrates that the fragmented structure remains relevant (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

This study examines why migration policies in the Western Balkans have taken on an inconsistent and fragmented appearance by analyzing the relationship between historical legacies and current transit migration pressures. The first level addresses the impact of the wars, forced migrations, and institutional fragilities of the 1990s on migration management in the region. The second level evaluates issues of border management, security, asylum capacity, and regional coordination that have become evident as the Western Balkans have transformed into a transit region for irregular migration flows toward Europe. Thus, it explains how the political and institutional legacy inherited from the past, combined with current migration pressures, fuels policy fragmentation in the Western Balkans.

2. MIGRATION GOVERNANCE AND POLICY FRAGMENTATION

Governance refers to a multi-stakeholder approach to management in which non-state actors—such as international organizations, civil society organizations, and local actors—participate in policy-making processes alongside state institutions (Çetin, 2022). Migration governance, meanwhile, demonstrates that human mobility is a multi-layered, cross-border, and complex field that cannot be regulated by national decisions alone. In this process, migration is managed through the interplay of relationships among states, international organizations, local actors, legal norms, administrative practices, and policy instruments (Karabacak et al., 2024). Migration management focuses primarily on regulating the processes of entry into the country, stay within the country, and exit from the country. According to the International Organization for Migration, this field encompasses practices such as the admission of foreigners, conditions of stay, deportation procedures, and providing support to those in need of protection (Altınöz, 2024). Migration governance has a broader scope than migration management. This is because migration movements are addressed in conjunction with their legal, institutional, social, and humanitarian dimensions, necessitating cooperation among various actors (Çetin, 2022).

According to Betts and Kainz (2017), migration governance refers to the development of cooperation at various levels by sovereign states to manage human mobility. The cooperation mentioned here operates within a fragmented network comprising multilateral, bilateral, formal, informal, and regional institutions, rather than a centralized and hierarchical regime. Critical approaches assess migration governance as management practices intertwined with

power relations (Jessop, 2002). Practices such as classification, regulation, and control, though appearing neutral, produce political effects (Carmel et al., 2021). More pluralist approaches, however, view politics as a factor that shapes policy networks and opportunities for cooperation in the field of migration. In contentious issues like migration, political disagreements directly determine the scope and impact of governance (Caponio et al., 2025).

Policy fragmentation refers to the failure of decision-making and implementation processes in the migration sector to be carried out in a centralized, coherent, and comprehensive manner. The influence of different institutions, norms, and actors on the same migration issue can lead to ambiguity of authority, lack of coordination, and variations in implementation (Kempchen, 2018). The intersection of areas such as security, the economy, human rights, border management, and the labor market within migration policy does not always produce a consistent governance structure (Betts and Kainz, 2017).

According to Betts and Kainz (2017), powerful states may prefer more flexible, regional, or informal cooperation channels over binding multilateral mechanisms that could constrain their spheres of sovereignty. This situation grants states the ability to select a policy platform aligned with their own interests and creates a strategic maneuvering space known as “forum shopping.” For this reason, fragmentation often emerges not as a coincidence but as a deliberate and functional form of governance. Practical needs such as border control, readmission, the regulation of transit movements, and security can be managed through fragmented mechanisms rather than a centralized migration regime. Geopolitical divisions also reinforce this fragmented structure. The growing political distance between countries creates restrictive effects on trade, finance, and human mobility; it makes migration flows more costly, controlled, and selective (Raggl and Ramskogler, 2025). Consequently, transparency, accountability, participation, institutional coordination, and legal consistency are among the fundamental principles for effective migration governance (Karabacak et al., 2024).

3. MIGRATION FOLLOWING THE YUGOSLAV WARS

With the end of the Cold War, the political balance in the Balkans was disrupted; the collapse of socialist regimes, economic crises, nationalism, and demands for self-determination intensified the dynamics of conflict in ethnically and federally fragile structures such as Yugoslavia (Ülger, 2003). While the transformation in Eastern Europe took different forms in Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania, the regime change in Yugoslavia directly led to the disintegration of the state. The country’s economic structure, ethnic diversity, and federal system deepened this process (Üzgel, 2001). Ethnic and political discontent in Yugoslavia did not emerge suddenly; it became visible in the 1980s and evolved into a crisis that led to civil wars in the early 1990s (Alkan, 1995). Following Tito’s death in 1980, the federal structure weakened, while economic instability and nationalist movements gained strength. Slobodan Milošević’s policy, which combined Orthodox faith, the communist legacy, and Serbian nationalism, aimed not so much at preserving Yugoslavia as at establishing a new, Serb-centered structure (Alkan, 1995).

Developments in Kosovo laid the early political groundwork for forced migration. In the post-Tito era, the Albanian population’s demand for a “seventh constituent republic” deepened the federal structure’s legitimacy crisis; demonstrations that began in Pristina in 1981 evolved into a demand for a “Republic of Kosovo” (Türkoğlu, 2001). By the late 1980s, Serbia had increased its control over Kosovo and Vojvodina; on March 23, 1989, Kosovo’s autonomous status was abolished. This decision became one of the fundamental breaking points that fueled the waves of repression, conflict, and displacement in the years that followed (Gjelani, 2007). The disintegration process, which began with the declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. Serbia’s use of the Yugoslav People’s Army and Serb militias in pursuit of its “Greater Serbia” goal escalated the conflicts. Attacks against Muslim Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina led to massacres—most notably in Srebrenica and Sarajevo—sieges, and ethnic cleansing. Approximately 200,000 people lost their lives in the war, nearly 2 million were forced to flee, and the region’s demographic structure underwent a profound transformation (Çakmak, 2024).

Milošević’s nationalist policies escalated violence against civilians in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo; massacres, forced displacement, and “illegal deportation” were among the primary charges in the trials at The Hague. The goal of the Chetnik movement during World War II to expel non-Serb communities from the region is considered one of the earlier examples of this historical continuity (Güven, 2016).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Sandžak, the Muslim population was forced into mass migration due to violence, oppression, and security threats. The displacement of approximately 1,370,000 people in Bosnia and Herzegovina—representing 31.39% of the total population—clearly illustrates the demographic dimension of the war. These migrations have led to the dispersal of Balkan peoples across Western European countries, particularly Germany, and the formation of permanent diaspora communities (Alp, 2011).

The Yugoslav Wars also influenced Turkey’s Balkan policy. The Bosnian War and the Kosovo crisis were met with reactions at both the public and parliamentary levels in Turkey; the crises were viewed both as a migration pressure

and as a matter of historical and humanitarian responsibility. Turkey has sought to provide diplomatic and humanitarian support in the face of violence against Turkish-Muslim communities. The establishment of TIKA in 1992, along with the activities of institutions such as the Yunus Emre Cultural Center and the Directorate of Religious Affairs, are significant for preserving cultural ties and post-war reconstruction (Biçici and Kayan, 2026). The 1994 Bosnian-Croat Federation talks and the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement aimed to guarantee refugees' rights to return home, free movement, and compensation. Dayton officially ended the war in Bosnia; however, demographic fractures, property disputes, economic collapse, security concerns, and legal uncertainties have made return limited and problematic (Çakmak, 2024).

4. BUFFER ZONING ALONG THE BALKAN ROUTE AFTER 2015

The Western Balkans are assessed in the literature as a geography that serves as a transition, balance, and buffer zone between East and West due to its historical and geopolitical position. During the Cold War, the region's placement along the political dividing line between the two blocs rendered the Western Balkans a strategically significant buffer zone; this fragile geopolitical structure laid the groundwork for the region being described as "Europe's powder keg" (Sıvış, 2020). Even after the Cold War, the Balkan states maintained their significance in international politics as a transitional belt situated between countries with a communist past and Western Europe (Esendik, 2018). The European Union's policies toward the Western Balkans are also linked to a strategy of extending the security domain beyond its own borders. While the EU aims to foster stability by transmitting its own norms and values to the region, it simultaneously seeks to strengthen border security and keep potential threats under control at its outer periphery (Esendik, 2018). In this context, political instability, institutional weakness, and a chaotic environment in the Western Balkans hold direct significance for European security. Especially when considered alongside security risks such as mass migration, international terrorism, and human trafficking, the region is seen as forming a critical security buffer zone for regional actors like Turkey. It is stated that Turkey has developed proactive policies aimed at expanding its security perimeter against potential migration waves resulting from instability in the Balkans (Sediroğlu, 2023).

The mass migration crisis that began in 2015 has fundamentally altered the geopolitical position of the Western Balkans, transforming the region into a strategic buffer zone for the European Union (EU) (Karakoç Dora and Botić, 2022). The pause in the EU's enlargement process and the fact that the countries of the region have been kept in a sort of indefinite "waiting room" status for full membership have been the key factors shaping this new geopolitical configuration of the Western Balkans (European Parliament, 2015). Particularly following the official closure of the route in March 2016, the region became a transit zone trapped between EU member states such as Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Croatia, where migrants were "stranded" for extended periods (Oruc et al., 2020). During this process, the EU has conceptualized the Western Balkans as an "external frontier" to ensure its own internal security and positioned the region as a defensive shield filtering migration flows (Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2022). Furthermore, it is argued that initiatives such as the Mini Schengen Initiative have reinforced the Western Balkans as a permanent buffer zone by keeping the region's countries within an alternative structure—one that serves as a substitute for rapid integration—and have reproduced the region's "shatterbelt" (conflict/fragmentation belt) characteristic under modern conditions (Karakoç Dora and Botić, 2022).

5. FRAGMENTED MIGRATION MANAGEMENT IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The fragmented nature of migration management in Bosnia and Herzegovina is shaped by the post-Dayton institutional order, post-war return processes, transit migration pressures, and an implementation model reliant on international actors. The constitutional structure that emerged following the Dayton Peace Agreement consists of units with distinct spheres of authority, such as the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska, and the Brčko District; decision-making mechanisms based on ethnic power-sharing necessitate consensus (Lamba and Hisoğlu Koç, 2022). This multi-layered structure makes it difficult to implement public policies from a single center; the fragmentation of authority across state, entity, canton, and local levels creates institutional fragility in areas requiring rapid decision-making and coordination, such as migration (Yoldaş, 2019). The MHRRBİH's assessment also notes that the post-Dayton administrative system operates with 13 constitutions, 14 legal systems, and over 140 ministries; this landscape creates a structural challenge regarding authority sharing and implementation standards in migration management (MHRRBİH, 2016).

The challenges Bosnia and Herzegovina faces in migration management are significantly influenced by the country's geographical location. Situated in the northwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula, between Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a transit corridor for movements toward Europe (Lamba and Hisoğlu Koç, 2022). Its role as a stopover for migrants and asylum seekers seeking to reach European Union borders along the Western Balkan route has led to the country being defined by current transit movements (Efendić, Husić-

Mehmedović, and Turulja, 2023). The increased migration flows, particularly after 2015, necessitated the revision of legislation regarding foreigners and asylum; in strategic documents, managing migration flows, strengthening border control, combating irregular movements, improving the quality of the asylum system, and inter-institutional coordination are among the primary objectives (Testaverde et al., 2024).

The fragmented governance structure became evident at an earlier stage in post-war return policies. Annex 7 of the Dayton Agreement grants refugees and internally displaced persons the right to return to their pre-war homes, reclaim their property, or claim compensation (Çaputlu and Macar, 2025). However, the implementation of these rights has involved local authorities, international organizations, and external support mechanisms as key actors in the process (Yoldaş, 2019). The active role played by organizations such as the OHR, IOM, UNHCR, OSCE, IFOR, and the World Bank in the return process has led to migration management proceeding through an externally supported, multi-stakeholder administrative structure rather than relying on national capacity (Çaputlu and Macar, 2025).

Although the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina has developed strategies for the implementation of Annex 7, the success of these strategies appears to depend on strong inter-institutional cooperation and consistent coordination at the national level (Çaputlu and Macar, 2025). The fact that the return process often does not become a priority in economic and social policies creates vulnerabilities, particularly in minority returns, in areas such as security, property, employment, education, access to social rights, and reintegration (Çaputlu and Macar, 2025). While majority returns to regions where their own ethnic group holds governing positions proceed more smoothly, minority returns to regions dominated by a different ethnic group follow a more problematic course (Çaputlu and Macar, 2025). This situation demonstrates that migration management in Bosnia and Herzegovina must also be explained by the reflection of ethnically based administrative divisions in policy implementation.

Current migration flows are making the on-the-ground effects of this fragmented structure more apparent. According to the European Commission, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has made some progress in migration management, inter-institutional cooperation remains weak, legislation is not applied uniformly across the country, and the state's assumption of full responsibility for the management of temporary reception centers is delayed (European Commission, 2024). The fact that 27,915 people expressed their intention to apply for asylum in 2023, 64,115 people were registered at four EU-supported temporary reception centers throughout the year, and approximately 13,000 people are estimated to have been outside the centers, demonstrates that Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as an intermediate transit zone where the concentration of migrants has become visible on the ground (European Commission, 2024). This influx into the temporary reception centers in the Una-Sana and Sarajevo cantons is creating significant administrative pressure not only at the border but also in the processes of accommodation, registration, referral, protection, and social support (European Commission, 2024).

The asylum system is also one of the areas where fragmented governance is most evident. Despite a high number of expressions of intent to seek asylum, the low level of actual asylum applications, the prolonged processing of applications, the need for standardization in the examination of requests for international protection, and the failure to fully ensure access to procedural safeguards limit the system's protection capacity (European Commission, 2024). Oruç's study notes that border police, temporary reception centers, and the asylum system require strengthening in terms of human resources, technical infrastructure, and institutional capacity (Oruç, 2024). The same study notes that some legal and social services provided to migrants are delivered through civil society organizations, volunteer networks, or non-institutional local support mechanisms; this situation reveals that public authorities have not sufficiently institutionalized the provision of standard services on the ground (Oruç, 2024).

This lack of order is also evident in readmission and border procedures. According to Oruç, procedural issues—such as children being registered as adults—have been observed in some readmission processes from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Oruç, 2024). In processes from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, however, a more organized procedure is described, involving social services, border police, guardians, and the relevant foreign nationals unit (Oruç, 2024). This discrepancy demonstrates that practices can vary depending on the border segment, institutional capacity, and coordination among actors. Mass returns carried out without examining protection claims, allegations of violence, and the blocking of access to asylum at the Croatia-Bosnia border are regularly reported by Amnesty International as a recurring issue; UNICEF, meanwhile, notes that 3,316 returns from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina were reported in 2023, with at least 326 of these involving children (UNICEF, 2023).

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, migration management cannot be treated as a purely technical issue limited to border security or temporary shelter capacity. When the country's post-Dayton multi-layered administrative structure, ethnically based political division, weak inter-institutional coordination, personnel and budgetary shortages, a model of implementation dependent on external support, and its location on migration routes heading toward Europe are considered together, the management issue fits into a broader framework. The failure to establish

a common national coordination center, the inadequacy of certain border infrastructure, shortcomings in registration and asylum procedures, and the incomplete institutionalization of state responsibility in temporary reception centers reinforce the fragmented governance landscape (European Commission, 2024). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, migration management operates not as a centralized and comprehensive public policy, but as a multidimensional governance domain distributed among state institutions, entity-level structures, cantons, international organizations, civil society actors, and local networks (World Bank, 2024).

6. CONCLUSION AND ASSESSMENT

The forced migration movements that emerged following the Yugoslav Wars, the mass crossings along the Balkan route after 2015, and the fragmented migration management in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate that human mobility is intertwined with political, legal, security-based, and humanitarian dimensions. Migration management in the region is shaped within a fragmented structure where different actors, jurisdictions, and policy priorities intersect.

The wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia revealed that forced migration is directly linked to ethnic conflict, security threats, loss of property, and post-war reconstruction processes. The displacement of millions of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and other conflict zones has shown that migration is a process that transforms social order, demographic structure, and political stability. Although legal regulations were established in areas such as the right to return, property restitution, and reintegration following the war, serious problems persisted at the implementation level. This situation has highlighted the gap between the recognition of rights on paper and their actual enforcement on the ground.

Developments on the Balkan route following 2015, however, indicate that the Western Balkans have become a strategic buffer zone in migration movements toward Europe. The European Union's policies of shifting border security to its external periphery have placed regional countries in a position to halt, slow down, or filter migration flows. The closure of the route, the tightening of border controls, and the fact that migrants are forced to wait for extended periods in the region's countries have increased the human cost of inconsistencies in migration management. Shortcomings in areas such as housing, registration, access to asylum applications, return procedures, child protection, and access to basic services demonstrate that migration policies are often driven by security and control priorities rather than a rights-based approach.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the areas where fragmented migration management is most clearly evident. The multi-layered administrative structure that emerged after the Dayton Agreement has created a decision-making process divided among entities, cantons, state institutions, international organizations, and local actors. This structure leads to policy inconsistencies, ambiguities in authority, and variations in implementation within migration management. Shortcomings observed in the asylum system, temporary reception centers, readmission procedures, and border practices increase legal uncertainty and hinder migrants' and asylum seekers' access to protection mechanisms. Consequently, migration management is moving away from being a coherent and comprehensive public policy and is transforming into a fragmented field driven by the interventions of various actors.

While institutional fragmentation, lack of coordination, and legal uncertainties may initially appear to be management issues, this structure also serves a specific function in terms of controlling migration movements. The detention of migrants along transit routes, their containment before reaching European Union borders, and the distribution of responsibility among different actors demonstrate that fragmented governance can effectively function as a migration control mechanism. In other words, this fragmentation also operates as a form of governance that slows down, directs, and keeps migration outside the borders.

Migration management in the Balkans must be brought within a more orderly, predictable, and rights-based framework. It is crucial to reduce policy inconsistencies, eliminate legal uncertainties, standardize asylum and protection processes, ensure that readmission practices align with human rights norms, and establish a clearer division of responsibilities between national institutions and international actors. Migration management must be re-examined through a framework that prioritizes human dignity, legal safeguards, and international protection obligations.

The sustainable strengthening of migration governance in the Balkans appears feasible through long-term policies that institutionalize regional cooperation. The development of data sharing among countries, common registration systems, cross-border protection mechanisms, and standardized asylum procedures both facilitates migrants' access to rights and enhances states' capacity to formulate predictable policies. The more effective inclusion of local governments, civil society organizations, and international organizations in decision-making processes contributes to the assessment of on-the-ground needs in terms of social integration, access to public services, and humanitarian protection. The European Union's support for the region must also be anchored in a framework that prioritizes the principles of the rule of law, human rights, institutional transparency, and shared responsibility. Such an approach

holds the potential to transform the Balkans from a buffer zone designed to halt migration into a regional actor that manages human mobility in a fairer, more orderly, and legally compliant manner.

REFERENCES

- Akova, S. (2012). Relations Between Turkey and the Western Balkans in the Context of Intercultural Communication from the Balkan Wars to the Present. *Motif Academy Folklore Journal*, 5(9), 170-201.
- Alkan, N. (1995). *Bosnia in the Fragmenting Mosaic of Yugoslavia*. Istanbul: Beyan Publications.
- Alp, İ. (2011). Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. *Journal of the Faculty of Letters, Trakya University*, 1(1), 1-50.
- Altınöz, A. (2024). Migration Management and Integration Policies in Turkey. *Boyabat Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences E-Journal*, 4(1), 1-27.
- Amnesty International. (2017). *Croatia 2016/2017*. Retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58b0340a2d.html>
- Bazerkoska, J. B. (2022). The EU integration process of the Western Balkans in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis. *Studia Europejskie*, 26(2), 123-140.
- Betts, A., & Kainz, L. (2017). *The history of global migration governance* (Working Paper Series No. 122). Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford.
- Biçici, M., & Kayan, S. (2026). Turkey's Policy on the Balkan Crises in the 1990s (Bosnia, Kosovo). *Asia Minor Studies*, 14(1), 88-104.
- Canveren, Ö. (2023). The Western Balkans in Turkish Foreign Policy: A SWOT Analysis Based on Expert Interviews. *Ankara University SBF Journal*, 78(1), 95-121.
- Caponio, T., Schiller, M., & Talleraas, C. (2025). The politics and governance of migration. *Governance*, 38(4), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.70055>
- Carmel, E., K. Lenner, and R. Paul, eds. 2021. *Handbook on the Governance and Politics of Migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Çakmak, S. (2024). Conflicts, massacres, and displacement during the Yugoslav War: Bosnian Muslims. *Danisman Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, (9), 59-79.
- Çaputlu, Ö., & Macar, E. (2025). Sustainable Return Migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case of Srebrenica. *Journal of Society and Identity*, 2(2), 113-130.
- Çetin, E. (2022). The Role and Impact of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Migration Governance in Turkey. *MSGSÜ Social Sciences*, 2(26), 221-241.
- Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department for Migration, Peace and Stabilization. (2025). *Regional Migration Governance Programme – Turkey and the Western Balkans (2025–2030)*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.
- Efendic, A., Husić-Mehmedović, M., & Turulja, L. (2023). Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Empirical evidence from the last two decades. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 53–72.
- Erdoğan, S. (2021). The European Union's cooperation with the accession countries (Western Balkans and Turkey) to address the refugee crisis. *Journal of Migration Studies*, 7(2), 208–237.
- Esendik, T. (2018). The Republic of Montenegro's accession to Western-centric international organizations (the European Union and NATO). *Social Sciences Studies Journal*, 4(13), 249-257.
- Estevens, J. (2018). The migration crisis in the EU. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6, 28. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0093-3>
- European Commission. (2024). *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024 report* (Commission staff working document No. SWD(2024) 691 final). Brussels: European Commission.
- European Parliament. (2015). *The Western Balkans and EU Enlargement: Lessons Learned, Ways Forward, and Prospects Ahead*. Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department.
- Eurostat. (2017). "Asylum in the EU Member States." March 16, 2017. Retrieved September 24, 2020 from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7921609/3-16032017-BP-EN.pdf/e5fa98bb-5d9d-4297-9168-d07c67d1c9e1>
- Eurostat. (2021). Asylum statistics. Published April 17, 2021. Retrieved May 25, 2021 from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_statistics
- Gjelani, E. (2007). *The Breakup of Yugoslavia and the Issue of Kosovo's Final Status in the Context of the Changing International Security System* (Unpublished master's thesis). Uludağ University Institute of Social Sciences, Bursa.
- Güven, İ. F. (2016). An Analysis of the Discourse and Policies of Josip Broz Tito and Slobodan Milosevic in the Context of the Breakup of Yugoslavia. *International Crimes and History*, (17), 101-128.

- Jessop, B. 2002. "Liberalism, Neoliberalism, and Urban Governance: A State–Theoretical Perspective." *Antipode* 34, no. 3: 452–472.
- Jureković, P. (2016). *The international refugee crisis as a challenge for the Western Balkans*. IFK Monitor.
- Karabacak, H., Köse, Y., & Bozkurt, M. A. (2024). Migration Governance from an Institutional Perspective: An Index for "Good" Migration Governance. *Journal of Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences*, 11(4), 1285–1302.
- Karakoç Dora, Z., & Botic, J. (2021). The Mini Schengen Initiative in the Western Balkans as a New Buffer Zone. *Ankara University SBF Journal*, 77(2), 287-307.
- Kempchen, L. (2018). *Understanding fragmentation in global governance architectures: The case of global land governance* (Unpublished master's thesis). Wageningen University, Wageningen, Netherlands.
- Lamba, M., & Hisoğlu Koç, T. H. (2022). The Administrative Structure of the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of the International Academy of Management*, 5(1), 74-87.
- Martin, S., Weerasinghe, S., & Taylor, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Humanitarian crises and migration: Causes, consequences, and responses*. Routledge.
- Meç, M. H. (2016). Irregular migration flows and human trafficking in the Western Balkan countries: Challenges of the convergence of counter-trafficking responses. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 1(1), 38–48.
- Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2016). *Diaspora and development of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2016–2020): Main project document elements*. Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Oruc, N. (2024). *Bosnia and Herzegovina Country Brief on the Policy Context of Irregular Migration*. Krems: University for Continuing Education Krems.
- Oruc, N., Raza, S., & Santic, D. (2020). *The Western Balkan migration route (2015–2019): Analytical report*. Prague Process, International Centre for Migration Policy Development.
- Özbadem, E., & Ertan, M. H. (2022). An Assessment of the Changing Social Media Usage Habits of Western Balkan Migrants During the Pandemic. *Journal of the School of Social Sciences, Namık Kemal University*, 4(2), 108–114.
- Özgöker, U., & Batı, G. F. (2017). The European Union's Enlargement into the Balkans and Its Contributions to 'Peace and Prosperity' in Balkan Countries. *Journal of Social Sciences in the Balkans and the Near East*, 3, 28-36.
- Raggl, A. K., & Ramskogler, P. (2025). Friend-shoring in migration? Investigating the links between geopolitical fragmentation and global migration. *OeNB Bulletin*, (Q3/25-3), 1-21.
- Sediroğlu, S. C. (2023). The Objectives of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans in the Post-Cold War Era and the Presence of the Turkish Armed Forces in the Context of These Objectives. *Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University Journal of Social Sciences*, 20(3), 1099-1116.
- Sıvış, E. (2020). Balkan Countries Between Russia and Transatlantic Ties in the Post-Cold War Era: The Cases of Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. *Electronic Journal of Social Sciences*, 19(74), 797-811.
- Şahin Mencutek, Z., Barthoma, S., Gökalp Aras, N. E., & Triandafyllidou, A. (2022). A crisis mode in migration governance: comparative and analytical insights. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(1), 12.
- Testaverde, M., Garrote-Sanchez, D., Miskiewicz, J. K., and Pantelaiou, I. (2024). *International Mobility as a Development Strategy: Bosnia and Herzegovina Country Report*, World Bank, Washington.
- Tuntevski, N., Tosheva, E., & Tilovska-Kechedji, E. (2020). Sailing through the storms: A Balkan response to contemporary migrant and refugee challenges. *Horizons International Scientific Journal Series A: Social Sciences and Humanities*, 24(13), 105–116.
- Türkoğlu, E. (2001). The Nationalism of Kosovo Albanians. In Ö. E. Lütem & B. Demirtaş Coşkun (Eds.), *Balkan Diplomacy* (pp. 103–130). Ankara: ASAM Publications.
- United Nations Children's Fund. (2023). *Refugee and migrant response on the Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes: Humanitarian situation report No. 50, 1 January to 31 December 2023*. United Nations Children's Fund.
- Ülger, İ. K. (2003). *Why Did Yugoslavia Break Apart?* Ankara: Seçkin Publications.
- Üzgel, İ. (2001). The Collapse of Socialist Regimes in the Eastern Bloc: The Balkans and Turkey. In B. Oran (Ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy: Facts, Documents, and Interpretations from the War of Independence to the Present: Volume II, 1980–2001* (pp. 480–498). Istanbul: İletişim Publications.
- World Bank. (2024). *International Mobility as a Development Strategy: Bosnia and Herzegovina Country Report*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Yoldaş, M. (2019). *Return Migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Unpublished master's thesis). Sakarya University Institute of Social Sciences, Sakarya.