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The Balkan corridor: still, they move

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Migration dynamics in the Western Balkans have undergone significant transformation since 2015. From large scale displacement in the 1990s, and immigration to western Europe, countries in the region today are facing the transitory movement of asylum-seeking flows, comprised predominantly of Syrians and Afghans.

The geographical position of the Western Balkans - between Greece that continues to function as the main entry point in Eastern Mediterranean and northern EU member states, renders the region a key transit point for people on the move. In the first half of 2022, according to FRONTEX, the Western Balkan corridor has become a common route for the attempted entry to the EU with 55,321 crossings detected from January 2022 through June 2022¹. Mixed migration (i.e. cross-border movements of people, including refugees and people seeking better lives and opportunities) is the key characteristic particularly for North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Several countries in the Western Balkans are also hosting Afghan evacuees that will be resettled to the United States. Albania received 2,400 Afghan refugees with approximately 1,800 awaiting resettlement². Kosovo has also hosted approximately 900 Afghans, mostly granted asylum by the US, while some didn't due to the vetting process from the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security³.

The route

The 'Balkan corridor' acquired particular prevalence during the 'refugee crisis' of 2015. Partly a result of Greece's initial 'wave through' policy, as well as the temporary willingness of Member States to receive asylum seekers, the movement was de facto facilitated through limited border controls⁴. Border policies applied by neighboring countries since late 2015 gradually transformed the Western Balkans to a space where asylum seekers waited for the opportunity to continue their journey onwards. The erection of the fence between Hungary and Serbia and eventually Croatia and the reintroduction of strict controls at the border between Greece and North Macedonia, pushed people towards Bosnia and Herzegovina where many remained stranded in the refugee camps near the Croatia border⁵. In 2022, of the total 2,700 refugees and migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2,000 are accommodated in EU-funded reception centers located in Sarajevo and Una Sana Cantons. Approximately 5,132 migrants were in Serbia as of April 2022⁶. Of those 3,679 were staying in Serbian state-run camps, with an unknown number residing also in squats, or camping in forests. Albania has also registered an increased presence of migrants, entering from Greece. In most cases they are turned back based on the bilateral readmission agreement, yet many attempt multiple border crossings.

¹ Frontex, EU external borders in June: Western Balkan route most active, luglio 2022

² S. Marusic, X. Bami and F. Sinoruka, Afghan Refugees Slowly Leave Balkan Countries for West, BalkanInsight, December 2021

³ Afghan evacuees stuck in US base face uncertain fate, Euronews, June 2022

⁴ G. Tsourapas, S. Zartaloudis, Leveraging the European Migrant Crisis? How Greece's Refugees Policy Gambit Backfired, The London School of Economics and Political Science, July 2021

⁵ R. Scaturro, Smuggling of migrants in the Western Balkans, Global Initiative, April 2022

⁶ <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/93048>

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with closure of borders and lockdowns, did not result in a decline in numbers. In contrast, as UNHCR notes “perhaps because of— the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Western Balkans region is currently experiencing a significant uptick in new arrivals from the Middle East and Central Asia”. This means the region will continue to be a priority for the EU as regards migration management⁷.

The role of the EU

The EU and its Member States have offered significant financial and technical assistance to the countries in the region, through the Instrument for Pre-accession assistance (IPA). Migration is one of the areas of focus, in particular since 2015, with emphasis placed on border controls, reducing irregular movement, and countering migrant smuggling. Funding has also been allocated for reception facilities with the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations offering financial and technical assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina⁸. Nonetheless, the majority of funds available are oriented towards bolstering border surveillance systems and data sharing⁹. since 2020 Frontex is at the Albanian border with Greece, North Macedonia and has held joint operations in Montenegro. In 2021 Frontex expanded operations in Serbia. There is a clear prioritization of security-oriented policies rather than bolstering national asylum and reception capacities. Coupled with border closures, fencing and violence has transformed the region into a buffer zone for the EU, with political implications for the region as well as immediate effect on the people on the move.

The challenge ahead

The transformation of the Western Balkans into a region of transit (and often strandedness) has facilitated the growth of anti-migration discourse (e.g., Serbia), push backs against NGOs assisting people on the move (e.g. Croatia) but also it as exacerbated the-already strained-relationship between countries in the region, posing a challenge to the regional cooperation

For migrants and refugees of immediate concerns are the persisting humanitarian needs and protection issues that remain. The uneven and slow socio-economic growth in the countries along the route, means that there are limited opportunities for those stranded to access employment opportunities, housing, and education. Asylum applications in Western Balkan states in 2022 remain low, in comparison with declared intent, likely due to the desire for onward movement. This means that people are likely to remain in a state of transit that exacerbates, as well as creates, vulnerabilities¹⁰.

Though the priority is at the borders, structural deficiencies in national asylum systems, including reception capacity, mean that the Western Balkans are unable to address the needs of those that remain in their territory. As they will continue to receive mixed migration, the EU should prioritize the bolstering of national asylum and migration systems through financial and structural support but also provide alternatives for asylum channels to the EU. The border

⁷ Strategy for UNHCR Engagement in mixed movement in the Western Balkans, 2021

⁸ Bosnia and Heregovina Factsheet, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

⁹ Blackmail in the Balkans: how the EU is externalising its asylum policies, Statewatch, June 2021

¹⁰ Western Balkans - Refugees, asylum-seekers and other people in mixed movements, UNHCR, March 2022

policies of their neighbor countries also affect the Western Balkan countries. Fences, push backs and violence at the borders, criminalization of entry, obstacles to accessing the asylum procedure: all this contributes to limiting the geographical spaces of movement and to containing people in countries that presently lack of the capacity (and in some cases willingness) to receive and care for asylum seekers.