

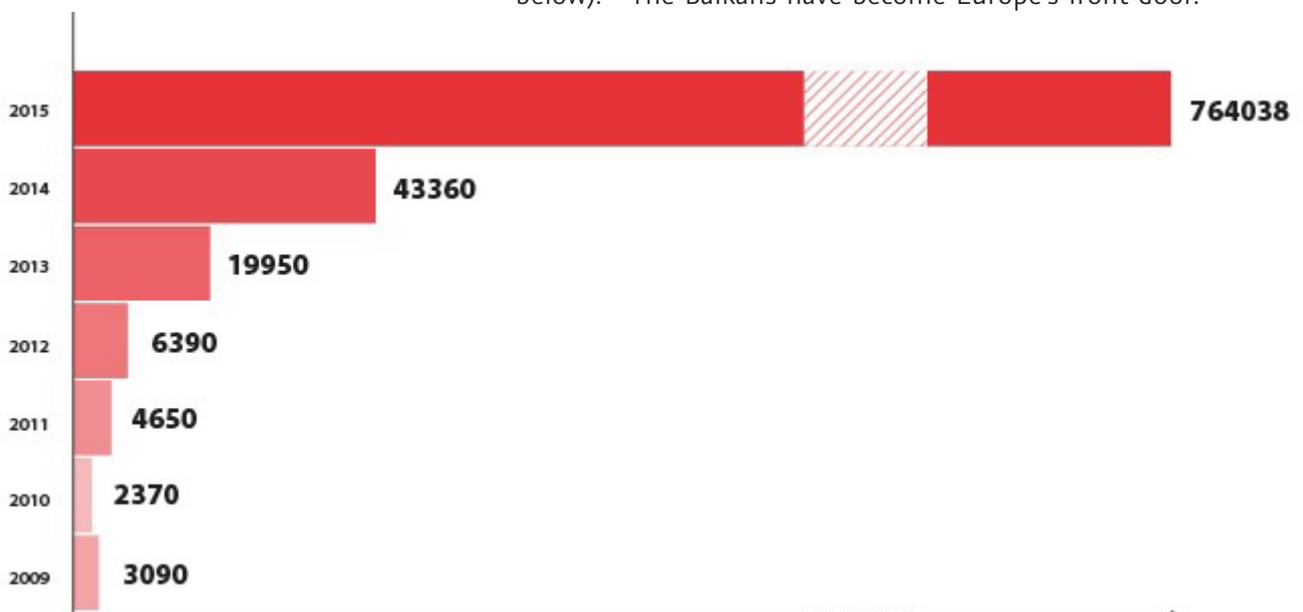
# Europe's Refugee Crisis and the Balkans

**Dimitar Bechev**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the question of how the Western Balkans have been affected by the crisis. It looks at the emergence of the migration corridor through the region, responses from the countries involved, and the fall-out from EU policy intended to address the challenge at hand.

THE BALKANS ARE NO STRANGER TO MIGRATION. LIKE SO many other corners of Europe, the region has witnessed a great deal of population movement in both its recent and more distant past. The painful memory of forced displacement during the Yugoslav Wars of Succession in the 1990s lives on to this day. But there have been countless other episodes: from the myriads of Albanians storming into Italy and Greece after the collapse of communism to the exodus of 300,000 Bulgarian Turks in the hot summer of 1989. One should also mention the time-honoured traditions of labor migration in Western Europe, which are as alive today as when the first Yugoslav Gastarbeiters arrived in Germany, Austria or Switzerland in the 1960s.

Now, however, the Balkans are not just exporting but also importing - or, rather, allowing the transit of - people. This turnaround should come as no surprise. The region's intermediary location, tucked between the violence-ridden Middle East and Western Europe, goes a long way to explaining the emergence of the so-called "Balkan route." Still, it is remarkable how quickly the change came about. The figures speak for themselves. According to the EU border agency FRONTEX, 764,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq trailed through Macedonia and Serbia in 2015 on their way from the Aegean islands to Germany and other well-to-do parts of Western Europe. That compares to 43,360 passages in 2014, 19,950 in 2013 and just 6,390 in 2012 (see Figure 1 below). The Balkans have become Europe's front door.



Number of registered refugees and asylum seekers along the Balkan route. Source: FRONTEX website

Though formally outside the EU, the Western Balkans - the cluster of countries once part of Yugoslavia as well as Albania - became central to deliberations in Brussels and member states' capitals about how to address the crisis as the number of transiting asylum seekers increased. World media discovered obscure sites like the border village of Idomeni, which hosted a makeshift camp, and sent despatches from Belgrade's crammed central bus station. Migration thus bound together the Middle East, the Western Balkans, and the EU.

### **What is the Balkans route?**

The Balkan route, stretching between the EU and the Middle East via Turkey and South East Europe, has actually been in existence for more than a decade and a half. Greece, the only Balkan country which is an EU member and part of the Schengen passport-free zone, plays a key role. From the 1990s onward, asylum seekers from places as far-flung as Pakistan and Bangladesh began arriving.<sup>1</sup> Many continued their journey on to Western Europe - as is the case with the 2015-16 wave. Others stayed, often finding a niche in the country's large grey sector. However, the grave crisis plaguing Greece since 2010 has made it much less attractive to migrants.

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Migration is one of the long list of unresolved or partly resolved issues in Greek-Turkish relations. The 2013 readmission agreement concluded between Turkey and the EU<sup>2</sup> was not implemented until recently, while the bilateral protocol signed by Ankara and Athens in 2002 is being applied in a patchy manner. As a result, Greece has not been able to return third country nationals back to Turkey, which in any case applies a geographic exception under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and accepts refugees only from Europe.

Immigration to Greece has had multiple consequences. First, it is one of the factors contributing to the rise to prominence of the far-right Golden Dawn party in recent years. Second, Athens has been one of the most vocal advocates of a common EU policy based on fair burden-sharing by all member states. The absence of a unified approach has often pushed Greece to take unilateral action. In December 2012, authorities completed the construction of a barbed wire barrier along a 12.5 km stretch on its border with Turkey - fencing off a Turkish territorial enclave lying westwards of the river Evros/Meriç, which separates the two countries.<sup>3</sup> This fence set a precedent soon to be followed across Central Europe and the Balkans.

The Balkan route that took shape in the summer and autumn of 2015 is an extension of the corridor through Greece. This is the reason some experts speak of an "Aegean-Balkan route". In the period between March 2015 and March 2016, hundreds of thousands of destitute Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, etc. made the short but life-threatening journey from the coast of Asia Minor to the nearby islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos and Leros. From there they would reach mainland Greece by boat, and, helped by GPS technology available through smart phones, trekked all the way to the border with Macedonia, some 800 km to the west. Then they would head to Vienna or Munich via Serbia and Hungary or Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. The Western Balkans became, in ef-



fect, Europe's refugee and migrant highway.

The route through former Yugoslavia replaced established corridors between North Africa and the EU across the Mediterranean. The reasons behind that shift include increased control of maritime borders and a shortage of boats operated by smugglers from Libya. In 2015, the number of migrants crossing into Malta and Italy (mostly from sub-Saharan Africa) fell by a tenth. The other principal cause is the upsurge of violence in Syria and Iraq. The deteriorating situation on the ground there has led more people to flee into Turkey and, from there, across the Aegean into Greece.

What has also come into play is the (partial) closure of the "other" Balkan route leading across the Bulgarian-Turkish border. In the summer of 2014, the Bulgarian government built a 30 km-long fence and deployed additional police staff. Bulgaria, which has been part of the EU since 2007, saw a big upsurge in asylum seekers in 2013, with numbers rising to 10,000. Despite restrictions, the number of applications went up, but only by a negligible margin: 11,081 in 2014 and 11,742 in 2015. Currently, 75% of these applicants are Syrian Kurds.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the figure is still modest compared to the flow through the former Yugoslavia, which remains the preferred route to the West. Obtaining asylum status in Bulgaria opens the door for travel to other EU members, and the approval rate of applications is very high, yet the Yugoslav branch of the Balkan route has been more popular. The reason is simple. While the Western Balkan corridor remained open until March 2016, restrictive border policies have made it more difficult for asylum seekers to enter Bulgarian territory.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Local responses to the crisis**

The numbers of refugees and asylum seekers along the Balkan route picked up dramatically in the spring of 2015, reaching a climax in September and October when, according to FRONTEX data, some 150,000 and 216,000 refugees and migrants entered the EU (see

Table 1 below). What caused the rapid rise was Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision in early September 2015 to welcome refugees in Germany. Her intention was to lead by example and encourage others in the EU to share the burden. But the fallout on the Western Balkans was dramatic as Germany's decision led to a sharp increase of through migration.

Being outside the EU, the Western Balkan countries had few incentives to act as gatekeepers. Indeed, the region saw itself as facing the collateral damage of external events from the wars in Syria and Iraq to Merkel's professed policy. The Balkan governments' initial choice was to keep borders open and therefore pass on the burden to EU members Hungary, Austria and Germany. At the same time, politicians from the region called for a pan-European solution, which would then help governments in the region deal better with the humanitarian emergency on their hands. Serbia and Macedonia in particular were fearful that a closure of the EU border would turn them into buffer countries, with tens of thousands of stranded migrants sucking in scarce resources. Meeting Merkel in September, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić criticised the "egotism" underlying EU members' resistance to the quota system proposed by the European Commission.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis caught Balkan countries off-guard and exposed a lack of preparedness. Their poorly resourced governments did not invest a great deal of effort and money, leaving few reasons for newcomers to consider staying in the region. As ever, international organisations and NGOs had to step in and fill the gap. To quote one example, the camp at Presevo, a mainly Albanian-populated border town in South Serbia, is managed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with money raised by activists and NGO networks in the West. Local civil society was mobilised as well, particularly in Serbia where the Refugee Action Serbia network launched a successful relief operation<sup>8</sup>. To their credit, leaders refrained from using hate speech



WB-RAN · Q4 2015

Table 1. Illegal border-crossing between BCPs

Detections reported by Western Balkan and neighboring countries, by purpose of illegal border-crossing, top five border sections and top ten nationalities

	2014		2015		2015 Q4		per cent of total		
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4			
<b>Purpose of illegal border-crossing</b>							% change in year ago	% change in previous Qtr	
Irregular migration	6 690	9 320	15 729	46 797	476 179	1 074 117	22 41.7	120	80
Other	51	85	69	92	88	260 678	500 572	290 11.7	30
Not specified	8 751	27 715	32 802	34 439	138 590	1 169	-96	-90	0.1
Smuggling	72	67	143	128	84	53	-23	-37	0
<b>Top Five Sections</b>									
Croatia - Serbia	280	108	174	173	91 898	465 806	400 924	608	35
FYR Macedonia - Greece	675	699	591	6 547	309 886	637 741	17 624	68	13
FYR Macedonia - Serbia	1 883	1 288	5 381	21 881	98 209	488 021	32 578	315	31
Bulgaria - Serbia	147	557	1 886	7 828	18 873	20 188	3 518	7,7	1.5
Albania - Greece	2 420	4 664	2 890	2 959	2 936	2 962	-37	1.8	0.2
Others	10 100	30 075	37 851	41 268	143 875	1 674	-94	-90	0.1
<b>Top Ten Nationalities</b>									
Not specified	30	158	157	214	247 591	530 883	584 603	114	40
Syria	3 912	6 470	8 446	33 182	296 445	431 847	6 508	83	32
Afghanistan	2 685	5 445	7 086	24 293	67 428	154 689	3 843	218	16
Iraq	104	383	1 618	6 258	21 198	112 462	29 263	431	8.4
Iran	80	113	250	643	2 132	50 585	24 932	628	1.3
Pakistan	187	241	897	3 891	19 757	8 004	3 221	-59	0.6
Morocco	50	8	27	133	125	5 004	63 825	3 927	0.4
Albania	2 185	4 018	2 760	2 749	2 872	2 385	-1.8	11	0.2
Palestine	170	615	361	767	1 906	2 383	338	46	0.2
Somalia	181	66	1 113	1 511	1 634	2 084	2 936	23	0.1
Others	4 800	19 790	25 182	7 025	13 559	8 578	-37	-37	0.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>14 900</b>	<b>37 193</b>	<b>48 753</b>	<b>81 456</b>	<b>614 947</b>	<b>1 336 010</b>	<b>1 462</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>

Irregular migration through the Western Balkans in numbers (source: Frontex<sup>6</sup>)

in relation to the refugees. Even Aleksandar Vučić, a politician with roots in the Serbian extreme nationalism of the 1990s, adopted a nuanced discourse and eschewed the link between migrants and terrorism made by his Central European colleagues. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, he pointed out that Serbia was prepared to host up to 5,000 migrants but could not go further than that. Macedonia's Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, by contrast, called on EU member states to help with personnel and equipment to guard the border with Greece and help seal off economic migrants from genuine asylum seekers.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, the push to close the Balkan route came from certain EU members. Rejecting Merkel's *Willkommenskultur* ("culture of welcome"), Hungary and Austria decided to take control into their own hands. By September 2015, Hungary had built a wall along its southern borders and, on October 16, officially declared the corridor from Serbia blocked. Hungary's decision move set off a domino effect across the Balkans. In November 2015, Macedonia erected a 30-km long barrier modelled on Hungary's. Nikola Gruevski visited Budapest that month, while Orbán travelled to Sofia in January, showing he had the support of Greece's neighbours. In the final analysis, however, Hungary's diplomatic moves did not lead to a complete blockage of the migratory flows, but merely redirected them towards Croatia and Slovenia and from there to Austria.

***The negotiations in Vienna were also a strategy to put pressure on Angela Merkel and the European Commission while they were negotiating a deal on migration with Turkey and an insurance policy in case of failure.***

At this point, Austria became more active, using its political influence in South East

Europe. On February 18, 2016, Vienna coordinated a meeting of police chiefs from Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and Macedonia, resulting in a decision to cap the daily number of people admitted into each of the countries to 580. Austria also limited the number of asylum application to 80 a day, a decision criticised by the European Commission. Vienna then followed up with a summit of interior ministers from the Western Balkan countries and Bulgaria on February 24. Angered by the bid to seal off Greece, Athens hurriedly recalled its ambassador in Vienna.<sup>10</sup> This coordinated effort by Balkan governments and Austria was seen as pointing a finger at Greece -- and making it pay the price by blocking its northern border. "We will not tolerate being turned into a warehouse of souls," was Alexis Tsipras' defiant reaction.<sup>11</sup>

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The negotiations in Vienna were also a strategy to put pressure on Angela Merkel and the European Commission while they were negotiating a deal on migration with Turkey and an insurance policy in case of failure. They preceded the EU Council meeting on March 7 attended by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the EU-Turkey Summit eleven days later. As both EU leaders and Turkey bargained over the parameters of a final deal, the Balkan group raised the stakes. On March 9, Macedonia declared its border closed.



“The Balkan route for illegal migration no longer exists”, declared the Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar<sup>12</sup>. The Austrian authorities, Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner, heartily endorsed the former Yugoslavs’ joint decision. A multinational team from EU member states and Serbia was despatched to aid Macedonian police at the border with Greece.

### **Prospects**

The shut-down of the Balkan route in March 2016 may or may not hold, depending on whether the EU and Turkey continue to cooperate on migration. Still, the crisis has underscored the central role the Western Balkans play in the management of EU borders. There are certain tradoffs involved. For instance, in September 2015, Germany added Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro to the list of “safe countries of origin”, ruling out asylum applications from their citizens<sup>13</sup>,

but this is hardly a concern. Overall, Balkan governments will be happy to guard the EU’s gates as long as the EU rewards them - or at least spares them criticism. This link is already visible in the case of Macedonia. As protesters took to the streets in mid-April, prompted by a presidential pardon of politicians implicated in a corruption scandal, commentators in the West argued against the “colored revolution” threatening to undermine a key ally in dealing with the refugee crisis.<sup>14</sup> Balkan leaders have also gained leverage vis-a-vis Brussels by aligning themselves with EU members - Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia and Bulgaria. Reports from Brussels suggest that the Macedonian government is intent on using the migrant crisis to revive the country’s accession bid, not unlike Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

The crisis highlights the Balkans’ strong link to Turkey. It was the agreement reached between Turkey and the EU on March 18 that relieved the pressure on the region. However, if the deal falls apart, the Western Balkans will pay the price, as will Greece. If numbers climb up once again and pressure starts mounting again, there will be friction.

Ties between Skopje and Athens are already strained, with the Macedonian government blaming Greece for not doing a good job in controlling migration to the EU. In early April, the Macedonian police repelled an attempt by migrants, stranded at the border, to cross over with tear gas and rubber bullets. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, in turn, accused Skopje of “shaming Europe.” In truth, the police acted with the EU’s tacit approval, but neighborly relations might turn much uglier if the Balkan route is re-activated. It won’t take much for other pairs of countries, for instance Serbia and Croatia that moved into a more nationalist direction after the November 2015 elections, to fall out over border controls and migration.

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The main problem, however, is in the EU, not the Western Balkans. Internal splits make it hard for the institution to work with the accession countries further south. In September 2015, Germany opted for a unilateral solution, opening its doors for refugees. Central Europeans - notably Orbán, but other leaders too - demanded complete closure. Greece and Italy traditionally advocate a common approach and burden-sharing embedded in EU law. The Western Balkan countries have had to adjust to the changing tides: first to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to open the doors, and then to the Central Europeans’ pushback. Crafting a common approach at the EU level is therefore a vital interest. The deal with Turkey, for all its flaws, is a step in that direction. However, if a fresh wave of hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers reaches the EU and member states start diverging, the Balkans will once more be left exposed.



***Crafting a common approach at the EU level is therefore a vital interest. The deal with Turkey, for all its flaws, is a step in that direction. However, if a fresh wave of hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers reaches the EU and member states start diverging, the Balkans will once more be left exposed.***

There are several policy recommendations that flow from this analysis. First, the Western Balkans should not be turned into a buffer zone where asylum seekers are stranded. They lack the means and the capacity to deal with large-scale migration. Second, a beefed-up common EU approach on asylum and migration is essential. Providing legal avenues for asylum seekers to move into the Union will alleviate pressure on the likes of Macedonia and Serbia, which have been at the forefront of the crisis. Third, the EU should invest into capacity in the region: e.g. reception facilities and administrative resources. Last but not least, the Western Balkans should also be involved in the coordination mechanisms emerging between the EU and Turkey. It is not realistic to expect that they cannot take part in the political negotiations, but they can fully participate in technical bodies dealing with migration issues.

### **EndNotes**

1 More than two-thirds of the estimated 1.2 million immigrants living in Greece, both documented and undocumented, come from Albania as well as from other post-communist countries in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union. The rest originate from countries in Middle East, Asia and Africa.

2 Under the terms of the readmission agreement, adopted after lengthy negotiations on December 16, 2013, Turkey undertook to accept back third country nationals crossing into EU territory. In return, Turkey obtained a roadmap of reforms needed to attain visa-free travel in the Schengen Zone. The readmission agreement's implementation was deferred to December 2016, the target date for the lifting of visas. Reform roadmap presented by Brussels was tied to visa liberalisation.

3 Nikolaj Nielsen, Fortress Europe: a Greek wall close up, EUObserver, 21 December 2012. <https://euobserver.com/fortress-eu/118565>

4 Dnevnik.bg, 28 September 2015. [http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2015/09/28/2617647\\_nad\\_11\\_700\\_bejanci\\_sa\\_potursili\\_zakrila\\_v\\_bulgariia\\_ot/](http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2015/09/28/2617647_nad_11_700_bejanci_sa_potursili_zakrila_v_bulgariia_ot/)

5 International human rights monitors have been very critical of the Bulgarian authorities. See for instance <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/20/bulgaria-pushbacks-abuse-borders>

6 European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (FRONTEX), Western Balkans Quarterly, Quarter 4, October-December 2015, available at [http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk\\_Analysis/WB\\_Q4\\_2015.pdf](http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/WB_Q4_2015.pdf)

7 Vucic on migrant crisis: Egoism reigns among EU countries, B92, 30 March 2016. [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&m-m=03&dd=30&nav\\_id=97526](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&m-m=03&dd=30&nav_id=97526)



8 See the report from Belgrade from the Assyrian writer and activist Nuri Kino, A Demand for Action in Belgrade, Huffington Post, 17 September 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nuri-kino/a-demand-for-action-in-be\\_b\\_8133482.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nuri-kino/a-demand-for-action-in-be_b_8133482.html)

9 We must work together to help migrants, Newsweek, 23 December 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/we-must-work-together-help-migrants-408654>

10 Greece withdraws ambassador from Austria, Financial Times, 25 February 2016. The ambassador returned in early May.

11 Alison Smale, With E.U. Paralyzed, 10 Nations Try to Stem Migrant Flow, New York Times, 24 February 2016.

12 Macedonia shuts Balkans route, BBC, 9 March 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35763101>

13 Macedonia and Bosnia had already been included in the list.

14 Ariel Cohen, Avoiding Balkan Black Swans, Huffington Post, 20 April 2016. <http://www.huffingtonpost>

15 Maïa De La Baume and Barbara Surk, Macedonia seeks date for EU membership talks, Politico, 17 March 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/macedonias-eu-membership-nightmare-refugees-migrants-border-nato/>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Director, European Policy Institute, Sofia  
Visiting Scholar, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, Senior Associate Fellow at Al Sharq Forum. He particularly focuses on Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa. He is also Visiting Scholar at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University and is the director of the European Policy Institute, a think-tank based in Sofia. In 2014-5, he was fellow at the European Institute, London School of Economics. His former positions include Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) as well as head of its office in Bulgaria, visiting professor at Hitotsubashi University (Tokyo) and research fellow at the European Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

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**Address:** Yenibosna Merkez Mah. 29 Ekim Cad. Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 blok kat:6 No.:52 34197 Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
**Telephone:** +902126031815  
**Fax:** +902126031665  
**Email:** [info@sharqforum.org](mailto:info@sharqforum.org)

**sharqforum.org**



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