

EU MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION CHALLENGES IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract: The Balkans region, long recognized for its complex geopolitical landscape, is currently facing a series of contemporary challenges largely influenced by migration dynamics and the European Union (EU) integration processes.

Migration in the Balkans has become a pressing issue due to the region's geographic location, serving as a gateway between the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. The influx of migrants and refugees has placed immense pressure on Balkan countries, which are often ill-equipped to handle large-scale migration flows due to limited resources and infrastructural challenges. This has led to significant social, political, and economic strains within these countries, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new tensions.

The role of the EU in shaping migration policies in the Balkans is critical. The EU's externalization of border control policies, including the implementation of stringent migration management strategies, has had profound implications for the region. Through agreements such as the EU-Türkiye deal and various bilateral arrangements, the EU has effectively outsourced its border security responsibilities to Balkan countries, making them frontline states in the broader EU migration strategy. This approach has raised concerns regarding human rights violations, the militarization of borders, and the adequacy of support provided to Balkan nations to manage these complex issues.

Furthermore, the aspiration of Balkan countries to join the EU adds another layer of complexity to the migration discourse. The EU membership prospects act as both an incentive and a pressure mechanism for these countries to align with EU standards and policies, including those related to migration and asylum.

However, the path to EU accession is fraught with challenges, including political instability, corruption, and socio-economic disparities, which are further compounded by the ongoing migration crises.

This paper research the socio-political and economic impacts of EU driven migration policies on the Balkan region, assessing the effectiveness of EU Balkan cooperation in addressing these challenges, explore the multifaceted issues at the intersection of migration and the EU's influence on the Balkans, particularly emphasizing the region's strategic position as a crucial transit corridor for migrants and refugees seeking asylum or better opportunities in Western Europe.

It underscores the necessity for a comprehensive and coordinated approach that balances security concerns with the protection of human rights and the promotion of sustainable development. Ultimately, the study calls for enhanced solidarity and collaboration between the EU and the Balkan states to navigate the complex migration landscape, ensuring stability and prosperity for the region.

Keywords: Migration, European Union (EU) integration, Balkans

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Introduction

The Balkans, located at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, have long represented a region of intricate socio-political dynamics and critical geopolitical importance. In recent decades, the area has emerged as a central transit corridor for migratory flows, driven by protracted conflicts and economic instability in neighboring regions, most notably the Middle East. The 2015 migration crisis brought renewed international attention to the Balkans, highlighting the region as a focal point of both humanitarian concern and political tension. The influx of migrants and refugees many of whom aspire to reach Western Europe in search of asylum or improved economic prospects has placed significant strain on the administrative and infrastructural capacities of Balkan states, several of which are either EU candidates or potential candidates (FitzGerald & Kancs, 2019).

The European Union's enlargement policy, which seeks to integrate the Western Balkans, is closely intertwined with its broader framework for migration governance. EU conditionality mandates that candidate countries align with EU standards, including those pertaining to migration management and the protection of human rights, as essential prerequisites for accession (Börzel & Risse, 2018). However, persistent institutional weaknesses and internal political instability within many Balkan states have hampered full compliance with these requirements, revealing a disjunction between the EU's normative expectations and on the ground realities.

Compounding these challenges is the EU's strategy of externalizing its border control policies, which often shift the responsibility for managing irregular migration onto non-member states along the periphery. This approach places a disproportionate burden on Balkan countries—many of which lack the necessary financial resources and institutional frameworks—thereby intensifying social tensions and generating significant humanitarian concerns (King, 2019). Often acting as *de facto* buffer zones, these states are tasked with enforcing EU migration controls without enjoying the protections or support mechanisms afforded to member states, resulting in governance dilemmas and human rights trade-offs.

Furthermore, the securitization of migration within EU discourse, which frames irregular migration as a threat to internal security has influenced how migration is managed at the national level in Balkan states. Policies driven more by deterrence than protection have led to militarized borders, instances of pushbacks, and limited access to asylum procedures, raising questions about the region's

adherence to international legal norms. Civil society organizations operating in these environments often face operational restrictions or political resistance, further complicating humanitarian efforts.

Despite these challenges, migration governance also presents potential avenues for institutional development and regional cooperation. The process of aligning with EU standards though uneven has incentivized reforms in border management, asylum systems, and rule of law. Cross-border cooperation initiatives, supported by EU funding instruments such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), have fostered technical and diplomatic coordination across the region. These developments suggest that migration, while often framed as a challenge, may also serve as a catalyst for broader state-building and regional integration efforts.

This study critically examines how the EU migration governance frameworks have reshaped the socio-political and economic dynamics of the Balkans. It explores the dual role of migration as both a pressure point and a policy lever, assessing how Balkan states navigate the tension between EU integration goals and the domestic realities of migration management. By analyzing institutional responses, policy transformations, and the lived experiences of migrants and host communities, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between migration, governance, and Europeanization in the Western Balkans.

Additionally, the role of international organizations, including UNHCR, IOM, and various NGOs, has been both crucial and contested. These actors often fill institutional voids, providing essential services in refugee camps and border zones, yet they also operate within politically constrained environments shaped by national governments and EU priorities. Their presence highlights the governance gap that exists in many Balkan countries, where state institutions may lack the capacity or political will to ensure basic rights and services for migrants and asylum seekers. Furthermore, the fragmented legal and policy frameworks across the region hinder the development of a coordinated and humane migration response.

The situation in the Balkans also reflects broader structural contradictions within the EU itself. While the EU promotes human rights and regional stability as core values, its migration governance often prioritizes deterrence and containment over protection and integration. This inconsistency undermines the credibility of the EU normative power, particularly in the eyes of Balkan societies that are simultaneously being asked to adopt these very principles. The rise of

anti-migrant sentiment and the instrumentalization of migration in domestic politics across Europe including within EU member states further complicates the regional integration process. These trends suggest that the challenges faced by the Balkans are not solely regional, but are symptomatic of wider tensions within the European project.

Moreover, migration governance intersects with other critical policy areas, including economic development, border security, and the rule of law. For many Balkan countries, migration is both an internal issue given high rates of emigration and an external one, as they serve as transit states. This dual role underscores the complexity of designing migration policies that are both effective and equitable. Regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process and EU-funded programs under the IPA III framework offer some mechanisms for addressing these challenges, yet the success of these efforts remains uneven and highly contingent on political will, administrative capacity, and public trust.

As such, this study is situated at the intersection of migration studies, European integration, and regional governance. It offers a critical lens on how the evolving architecture of EU migration governance impacts not only the management of borders and movement, but also the democratic trajectories and institutional resilience of states on the EU's periphery. By examining the Balkans as both subjects and agents in this process, the research aims to provide a nuanced account of how migration shapes—and is shaped by—the broader dynamics of regional integration, state transformation, and international politics.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on an integrated theoretical framework comprising Europeanization, Securitization Theory, and External Governance and Conditionality to critically interrogate how migration governance in the Western Balkans is shaped, negotiated, and operationalized in the shadow of the European Union. These theories, when used in combination, enable a multi-dimensional analysis that encompasses the normative, institutional, strategic, and discursive transformations resulting from the EU's complex and asymmetrical engagement with the region.

1. Europeanization: At its core, Europeanization refers to the process through which the European Union exerts influence over the political, administrative, and legal systems of its member states and candidate countries. As Radaelli (2003) articulates, Europeanization is not simply about top-down adoption of EU norms but includes the institutionalization of new rules, the redefinition of

domestic interests, and the reshaping of identities and governance structures. In the context of EU enlargement, particularly in the Western Balkans, Europeanization often manifests as a form of normative diffusion, whereby domestic actors adapt their policies, laws, and practices in line with EU requirements.

In the field of migration governance, Europeanization is embodied through the alignment with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), Schengen Border Code, and associated directives concerning asylum procedures, border control, and return mechanisms. The expectation is that candidate countries will establish asylum systems that adhere to international protection standards, develop effective border management frameworks, and participate in regional coordination mechanisms.

However, Europeanization in the Western Balkans is uneven and selective. Factors such as institutional capacity, political culture, and elite preferences mediate the depth and quality of compliance (Featherstone & Radaelli, 2003). The transformative power of Europeanization often clashes with entrenched domestic practices, especially in post-socialist states with weak administrative institutions, high levels of corruption, and contested legitimacy. In such cases, Europeanization may produce “shallow” or “mimetic” compliance, where formal adoption of EU norms is not matched by meaningful implementation or behavioral change.

Moreover, Europeanization interacts with identity politics and state sovereignty, particularly in countries where migration is framed as a domain of national security or cultural autonomy. The Western Balkans, marked by recent histories of conflict and ethnic division, often perceive EU-led migration reforms as external impositions rather than mutually negotiated commitments (Grabbe, 2006). This resistance complicates the integration process and reveals the limits of conditionality-based governance in volatile political environments.

2. Securitization Theory: To understand the discursive and political construction of migration in the Western Balkans, this research engages with Securitization Theory, most notably advanced by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998) and later elaborated by Balzacq (2011). Securitization refers to the process by which state actors transform an issue into a matter of security through “speech acts” public declarations, policy framing, and rhetorical strategies that define a subject (such as migration) as an existential threat. This framing legitimizes the adoption of extraordinary measures and justifies bypassing normal political procedures.

In the Western Balkans, the securitization of migration has been catalyzed by both domestic and external pressures. National governments, facing political instability and populist competition, have often portrayed refugees and migrants as threats to public order, national identity, and economic security. At the same time, EU institutions and member states particularly those on the frontline of migration routes have encouraged a securitized approach, emphasizing border surveillance, biometric data collection, and restrictive asylum policies (Bigo, 2002).

The discursive framing of migration as a security issue has profound implications for both governance and human rights. It contributes to a policy environment where emergency measures, such as the construction of physical barriers, detention without trial, and extraterritorial asylum procedures, become normalized (Balzacq, 2011). These practices often contravene international obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights. As Bigo (2002) notes, the merging of policing, intelligence, and border management functions creates a “ban-opticon” a surveillance regime that categorizes and filters human mobility according to perceived risk rather than need or legal entitlement.

Furthermore, securitization exacerbates social polarization and xenophobia, particularly in countries with limited exposure to multiculturalism and fragile democratic institutions. It also affects civil society actors and humanitarian organizations, which may be stigmatized or restricted when operating in securitized border zones. Understanding how securitization operates—through political discourse, media narratives, and institutional practices is essential to revealing the underlying logics of exclusion and control embedded within contemporary migration governance.

3. External Governance and Conditionality: The third theoretical pillar is the concept of External Governance, particularly as it applies to the EU’s relations with neighboring states. External governance refers to the EU’s ability to project its rules, norms, and regulatory frameworks beyond its formal borders through various instruments such as association agreements, technical assistance, funding mechanisms, and accession negotiations (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). In the context of migration, this has included outsourcing border control responsibilities to non-member states and promoting convergence with EU standards through conditionality the linking of rewards (e.g., visa liberalization, financial aid, or accession progress) to compliance with specific reforms (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

In the Western Balkans, the EU exercises significant influence over domestic migration policies through this mechanism of conditionality. Countries seeking EU membership are required to align their asylum laws, establish functional border management systems, and cooperate on readmission and return procedures (Grabbe, 2006). However, this model of governance is inherently asymmetrical. While the EU defines the standards and controls the rewards, Balkan states must bear the costs both politically and economically of implementing complex and often unpopular reforms (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009).

Moreover, the EU's emphasis on "migration containment" has led to a reorientation of external governance priorities. Instead of focusing on long-term development, human rights, or regional integration, the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans increasingly centers on short-term security objectives reducing irregular flows, preventing secondary movements, and securing borders (King, 2019). This shift risks reproducing a technocratic and depoliticized approach, where compliance is measured in border control statistics rather than democratic resilience or societal well-being.

Critically, the external governance of migration has also exposed the fragility of EU normative power. While the EU claims to export values such as solidarity, rule of law, and human rights, its migration policies often contradict these principles in practice especially when implemented through deals with third countries that lack strong democratic credentials (Börzel & Risse, 2018). This discrepancy undermines the EU's legitimacy as a normative actor and raises questions about the ethical and strategic coherence of its enlargement and neighborhood policies.

4. Synthesis and Analytical Relevance: By combining these three theoretical perspectives, this study constructs a multi-level analytical framework that is both explanatory and critical. Europeanization captures the formal mechanisms of policy transfer and institutional alignment; securitization theory interrogates the discursive and symbolic dimensions of migration governance; and external governance sheds light on the power asymmetries and strategic calculations underpinning EU Balkan relations.

This framework allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and address the structural contradictions of EU migration governance: between rights and security, inclusion and exclusion, integration and containment. It also facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the Balkans not merely as passive recipients of EU influence but as active agents who interpret, contest, and sometimes instrumentalize EU norms in pursuit of domestic political goals.

Ultimately, this theoretical architecture provides a robust foundation for assessing how the EU–Balkan migration nexus is reshaping statehood, sovereignty, and governance in a region still navigating the legacies of post-conflict transition and the ambiguities of European integration.

EU Migration Policy Overview

The evolution of the European Union’s migration policy is intricately linked to broader political developments, shifting governance paradigms, and recurrent crises that have profoundly reshaped the EU’s approach to managing human mobility and border security. Initially, the EU’s focus was on internal harmonization, exemplified by the establishment of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The CEAS was designed to standardize asylum procedures, reception conditions, and responsibility allocation under the Dublin Regulation, thereby promoting legal certainty and solidarity among member states (Guild, Costello, & Moreno-Lax, 2015). However, the 2015 refugee crisis exposed the structural deficiencies of this framework, particularly highlighting the uneven distribution of asylum seekers, the failure of burden-sharing mechanisms, and divergent political will among EU states, which together undermined the system’s legitimacy and functionality (Geddes & Scholten, 2016).

This crisis served as a catalyst for a fundamental policy reorientation toward externalization, marking a shift from harmonizing internal asylum systems to managing migratory pressures at the EU’s external borders and beyond. Externalization involves delegating migration control responsibilities to third countries through various tools, including readmission agreements, financial aid, and border management assistance, especially targeting regions along key migratory routes such as the Western Balkans (Kaunert & Léonard, 2018). This external governance strategy is characterized by a heightened emphasis on securitization, with migration framed primarily as a threat to internal security and political stability, justifying the reinforcement of border controls and the surveillance of mobile populations.

Such externalization is frequently justified by EU policymakers as necessary to safeguard internal security and the integrity of the Schengen Area. However, this approach raises significant questions related to state sovereignty, legal accountability, and adherence to international human rights standards. Critics argue that it leads to a “buffer zone” effect, where vulnerable migrants are effectively trapped in countries that may lack the institutional capacity or political will to uphold protection obligations, thereby creating conditions conducive to rights

violations, including unlawful detention and refoulement (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This has been described as a geopolitical externalization of risk, whereby the EU offloads its humanitarian and legal responsibilities onto weaker neighbors while simultaneously securing its borders (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009).

In the Western Balkans, the EU's external migration policy manifests itself through a complex web of bilateral and multilateral agreements, operational cooperation with agencies such as Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), and conditionality mechanisms linked to the EU accession process (Trauner, 2017). These arrangements have strengthened border security infrastructure, increased surveillance capabilities, and facilitated more efficient returns and readmissions. Yet, this emphasis on control often occurs at the expense of comprehensive strategies aimed at integration, social cohesion, and migrant protection. Consequently, while Balkan states have become critical actors in the EU's migration governance architecture, their role often remains constrained within a security-centric framework that insufficiently addresses the multidimensional challenges posed by migration, including humanitarian needs, social inclusion, and economic integration.

Furthermore, this governance model reflects broader normative contradictions within EU policy. On the one hand, the EU promotes itself as a normative power committed to upholding human rights and refugee protection; on the other hand, its externalization policies frequently undermine these commitments, creating a "normative gap" between rhetoric and practice (Börzel & Risse, 2018). This tension challenges the EU's credibility both domestically and internationally, fueling skepticism and contestation in partner countries.

Overall, the EU's migration policy evolution demonstrates a shift towards fragmented, multi-level governance, involving a complex interplay between supranational institutions, member states, candidate countries, and non-state actors. This fragmented governance landscape complicates accountability, coordination, and coherent policy implementation, especially in the volatile context of the Western Balkans (King, 2019). Addressing these challenges requires a more holistic approach that balances security concerns with human rights protection, and integrates migration governance within broader socio-economic development and regional cooperation frameworks.

The Rule of Law in the EU's Western Balkans Enlargement Policy

The rule of law is universally recognized as a cornerstone of the European Union's enlargement strategy, embodying essential principles of democratic governance, judicial independence, transparency, and the protection of fundamental rights (Naumovski, Apostolovska, & Ognjanoska, 2020). In the specific context of migration governance, the rule of law underpins the legitimacy and efficacy of asylum procedures, border controls, and protection mechanisms. It ensures that policies comply with international legal obligations, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, and prevents arbitrary or discriminatory practices in migration management (Naumovski et al., 2020). As such, rule of law reforms are fundamental to building migration systems that are both efficient and rights-respecting.

However, across the Western Balkans, persistent structural and institutional deficiencies challenge the realization of these standards. Systemic issues such as judicial corruption, lack of judicial autonomy, and politicization of legal processes hinder the consistent application of migration and human rights laws (Bieber, 2020). Weak rule of law frameworks also create environments conducive to impunity and lack of accountability, undermining migrants' trust in legal institutions and often pushing vulnerable populations toward irregular and risky migration channels. This legal fragility not only threatens migrant rights but also diminishes the credibility and integrity of each country's EU accession trajectory.

To address these deficits, reforms must transcend formal legal amendments and target the broader institutional ecosystem. Effective change requires strengthening the independence and capacity of judicial bodies, enhancing transparency in administrative procedures, and fostering cooperation between state agencies and civil society actors who play critical watchdog roles. Civil society engagement, in particular, is pivotal for ensuring monitoring, advocacy, and protection of vulnerable groups, which in turn bolsters democratic accountability and policy responsiveness (Naumovski et al., 2020). The European Union's conditionality framework incentivizes such reforms by linking progress on rule of law benchmarks with accession advancements, yet without sustained domestic political commitment and inclusive governance practices, reform efforts often remain superficial or reversible.

Country-Specific Governance and Migration Management

Serbia: As a principal transit hub within the Western Balkans, Serbia faces immense pressure to both control irregular migration and align with the EU acquis. The Serbian government, supported by EU funding and technical assistance, has expanded reception facilities and improved border management infrastructure. Yet, these improvements coexist with ongoing problems, including inadequate social integration programs and strained community relations. Political sensitivities around migration contribute to inconsistent policy enforcement, while limited judicial capacity affects the fairness and transparency of asylum adjudications (UNHCR, 2021). Serbia's experience illustrates the tension between EU-driven reform imperatives and complex domestic political realities that can hinder comprehensive migration governance.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Bosnia and Herzegovina represents one of the most challenging contexts for migration governance due to its highly decentralized and ethnically fragmented political system. The absence of cohesive migration policy frameworks and coordination among cantonal, entity, and state-level authorities severely hampers effective asylum processing and border security (European Court of Auditors, 2022). Migrants frequently experience protracted stays in informal settlements under dire conditions, while political stalemates delay necessary reforms. This fragmentation weakens institutional capacity and exacerbates vulnerabilities, rendering the country reliant on external support with limited ability to implement durable solutions independently.

North Macedonia: North Macedonia has demonstrated notable institutional progress, aligning key migration policies with EU standards and investing in border security. Nonetheless, critical challenges remain, particularly regarding human rights compliance. Reports from Amnesty International (2020) reveal that pushbacks and harsh treatment of migrants persist, signaling gaps between official policy frameworks and on-the-ground practices. The government faces the delicate task of balancing stringent border controls with adherence to humanitarian principles and EU normative expectations, highlighting ongoing tensions between security priorities and human rights obligations.

Albania: Albania's migration governance system is characterized by underdevelopment and resource constraints, which are compounded by political instability and economic challenges. Although Albania is less impacted by migration flows relative to its neighbors, its strategic location necessitates the development of robust asylum and integration frameworks (European Commission, 2023). Weak institutional structures and limited capacity impede the country's ability to meet

EU rule of law and migration governance criteria fully. Strengthening these systems is imperative not only for accession prospects but also to address emergent migration pressures regionally.

Regional Implications and the Path Forward

The persistent rule of law challenges across the Western Balkans have profound regional implications. Weak legal frameworks and fragmented governance can facilitate irregular migration flows and exacerbate human rights abuses, impacting not only individual countries but also the wider European neighborhood (King, 2019). Effective migration governance in the Balkans is therefore a regional public good, necessitating enhanced cooperation, harmonization of policies, and shared commitments to human rights standards. The EU's enlargement policy, with its rule of law conditionality, remains a critical lever for promoting such integration, but its success depends on synchronized domestic reforms, political stability, and the empowerment of civil society.

Sustainable progress also requires shifting from a predominantly security-driven approach to one that integrates developmental, social, and humanitarian dimensions of migration governance. This entails investing in legal aid, social services, and integration programs, alongside institutional capacity building. Only through this multidimensional approach can the Western Balkans transform migration governance into a domain that upholds human dignity, ensures security, and supports the region's broader EU integration ambitions.

Human Rights and Social Integration Issues

Human rights concerns continue to dominate the discourse on migration governance in the Western Balkans, where the externalization of the European Union's border policies has significantly contributed to the securitization of migration management. This securitized environment often comes at a considerable cost to the protection of migrant rights. Practices such as pushbacks, the informal and often illegal return of migrants at borders without due process remain widespread despite international legal prohibitions, undermining fundamental principles of non-refoulement and asylum access (Council of Europe, 2021). Moreover, inadequate reception conditions, characterized by overcrowded, under-resourced facilities lacking basic hygiene and safety standards, compound migrants' vulnerability. The limited availability of legal assistance further restricts migrants' ability to claim rights or challenge decisions, raising profound ethical and legal concerns about compliance with European and international human rights frameworks.

The challenges extend beyond immediate border management to the broader sphere of social integration, where policies in many Western Balkan countries are frequently underfunded, fragmented, and lacking strategic coherence. This policy vacuum contributes to the marginalization and social exclusion of migrants and refugees, impeding their access to essential services and opportunities necessary for meaningful inclusion (Gemi & Simsek, 2021). Compounding these difficulties is the rise of xenophobic attitudes and nationalist rhetoric across the region, which political actors sometimes exploit to advance populist agendas. Such dynamics fuel social polarization, hinder intercultural dialogue, and create hostile environments for migrants, thereby undermining regional stability and the EU's normative goals of inclusive, rights-based governance.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires the adoption of comprehensive and integrated integration policies that go beyond basic reception and focus on long-term inclusion. Key policy areas must include language acquisition programs, equitable access to education and vocational training, facilitation of employment opportunities, and guaranteed access to healthcare and social services. These elements are crucial not only for migrants' socio-economic empowerment but also for fostering social cohesion and countering exclusionary narratives (Kostovicova, 2017).

In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs) emerge as indispensable actors. They play a vital role in filling service provision gaps, offering legal aid, psychosocial support, and cultural mediation. Additionally, CSOs act as advocates for migrant rights, holding governments accountable and fostering dialogue between migrants and host communities (Kostovicova, 2017). Strengthening the capacity and enabling environment for civil society engagement is therefore critical for advancing human rights and promoting inclusive integration in the Balkans.

Ultimately, ensuring that migration governance in the Western Balkans aligns with human rights principles requires a balanced approach that reconciles security imperatives with humanitarian obligations. The EU and its partners must prioritize the development of policies and institutional frameworks that protect migrants' rights, promote social inclusion, and mitigate the rise of xenophobic and nationalist pressures that threaten social cohesion.

EU Accession Conditionality and Migration

EU accession conditionality remains a critical leverage mechanism for advancing migration governance reforms across the Western Balkans. By explicitly linking progress in accession negotiations to the adoption and implementation of robust migration management frameworks, adherence to the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) standards, and the reinforcement of the rule of law, the EU wields significant influence over domestic policy agendas in candidate and potential candidate countries (Börzel & Risse, 2018). This conditionality framework functions as a powerful incentive, motivating Western Balkan states to undertake complex legal, institutional, and administrative reforms necessary to align with EU *acquis communautaire*.

However, despite its prominence, the conditionality mechanism encounters several limitations and challenges, rooted largely in asymmetric power relations between the EU and candidate states. The EU's agenda-setting and policy design prerogatives often leave Balkan countries with limited agency, transforming them into passive recipients of externally imposed reforms. This dynamic can lead to the superficial implementation of policies, where reforms are enacted primarily to satisfy formal benchmarks rather than reflecting genuine domestic commitment or institutional capacity (Grabbe, 2006). Moreover, the perceived disconnect between EU demands and local socio-political realities can foster frustration, political backlash, and the rise of populist narratives that criticize both migration and EU integration processes, thereby threatening the sustainability of reform efforts.

To mitigate these challenges and enhance the efficacy of conditionality, the EU should pursue a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach. This includes fostering greater dialogue and consultation with domestic stakeholders including government institutions, civil society actors, and marginalized communities to ensure that policies are better tailored to on-the-ground realities. Additionally, increasing financial and technical assistance dedicated to capacity building, infrastructure development, and rights-based migration management can empower Balkan states to meet EU requirements more effectively. Recognizing and addressing the specific political, social, and economic constraints faced by these countries is essential to bridging the gap between EU ambitions and local capacities.

Policy Recommendations- Addressing the complex migration and integration challenges confronting the Western Balkans requires a multi-dimensional and balanced strategy that harmonizes security imperatives, human rights obligations, and sustainable socio-economic development:

1. Institutional Strengthening: Prioritize comprehensive capacity building initiatives for judicial bodies, immigration authorities, and administrative institutions to enhance their ability to enforce migration and asylum laws effectively. Emphasize transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures to build public trust and ensure consistent protection of migrant rights. Strengthening institutional independence and promoting professional training are key to sustaining reforms. Additionally, improve inter-agency coordination across ministries and border agencies to foster cohesive policy implementation and avoid fragmented efforts.

2. Rights-Based Border Management: Adopt and rigorously implement border control policies that fully comply with international human rights standards, including the prohibition of pushbacks and the guarantee of access to asylum procedures. Establish independent monitoring and oversight mechanisms to increase transparency and prevent abuses, ensuring accountability for violations. Promote the use of technology and data analytics to enhance border security while safeguarding privacy and human rights. Encourage regional cooperation to address transnational migration challenges collectively, facilitating information sharing and joint response mechanisms.

3. Inclusive Integration Programs: Develop and implement comprehensive social integration policies that address migrants' and refugees' needs across multiple dimensions—language acquisition, education, vocational training, employment opportunities, and healthcare access. Foster programs that promote intercultural dialogue and community engagement to combat xenophobia and facilitate social cohesion. Incorporate targeted support for vulnerable groups such as women, unaccompanied minors, and persons with disabilities. Encourage the involvement of local communities and migrant-led organizations in designing and delivering integration services, enhancing ownership and sustainability.

4. Enhanced EU Support: Increase targeted financial aid and technical assistance aimed at strengthening infrastructure (e.g., reception centers), capacity-building initiatives, and the empowerment of civil society organizations active in migration and integration issues. Encourage flexible funding mechanisms that allow adaptation to evolving challenges and local priorities. Support the development of monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the impact of migration policies and ensure accountability. Facilitate knowledge exchange and training programs between EU member states and Western Balkan countries to share best practices and innovations.

5. Partnership and Dialogue: Promote equal partnership models between the EU and Western Balkan states, encouraging shared decision-making and mutual accountability. Strengthen mechanisms for regional cooperation and policy coordination, facilitating the exchange of best practices and joint responses to migration pressures. Encourage multi-stakeholder dialogues that include governments, civil society, international organizations, and migrant representatives to foster inclusive policy development. Support regional initiatives to harmonize legal frameworks and standards for migration management, asylum, and integration.

6. Data Collection and Research: Enhance systematic data collection and research capacities to inform evidence-based policymaking. Invest in the development of standardized data systems to monitor migration flows, demographic profiles, and integration outcomes. Promote transparency by sharing data with relevant stakeholders and ensuring protection of personal information. Support independent research institutions and academic collaborations to analyze emerging trends, challenges, and best practices in migration governance.

7. Community Empowerment and Anti-Xenophobia Initiatives: Implement proactive measures to combat xenophobia and discrimination by investing in public awareness campaigns, educational programs, and intercultural initiatives. Promote narratives that emphasize the contributions of migrants to local economies and societies. Support grassroots organizations and community leaders in fostering social cohesion and addressing tensions. Develop mechanisms for conflict resolution and mediation to manage social friction arising from migration dynamics.

Integrating these comprehensive recommendations will create a more resilient, rights-based, and effective migration governance framework in the Western Balkans, aligned with both EU accession objectives and humanitarian imperatives. This holistic approach fosters not only state capacity but also social acceptance and long-term regional stability.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans remain a region of profound strategic importance within the broader European migration governance architecture. Positioned at the nexus of complex migration routes from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa toward Western Europe, the Balkans exemplify both the challenges and opportunities inherent in contemporary migration management. Over recent decades, the externalization of the European Union's border control responsibilities to Balkan

states has exposed and, in some cases, exacerbated pre-existing structural weaknesses across governance, rule of law, and human rights protections in the region. This dynamic reveals a persistent tension between the EU's security-driven approach to migration management and the imperative to uphold humanitarian standards and fundamental rights.

The EU's enlargement policy serves as a central mechanism through which migration governance reforms are promoted in the Western Balkans. The promise of EU accession acts as a powerful motivator for candidate and potential candidate countries to align their policies with the EU *acquis*, particularly in the areas of asylum, border management, and the rule of law. However, this process remains fraught with complexities. Despite formal commitments, many Balkan states face considerable obstacles in implementing reforms effectively. Political instability, institutional weaknesses, corruption, and limited administrative capacity often result in superficial compliance rather than genuine transformation. Moreover, the asymmetric nature of the EU–Western Balkans relationship constrains local ownership of policies, leading to a sense of externally imposed mandates that can engender resistance or foster populist backlash.

The securitization of migration within both the EU and Balkan states has further complicated governance frameworks. Migration is frequently framed as an existential security threat, legitimizing restrictive policies such as border militarization, pushbacks, and stringent asylum procedures. While these measures aim to manage flows and maintain public order, they frequently come at the expense of migrants' rights and undermine international legal obligations. The region's border regimes, heavily supported and partially funded by the EU, have often been criticized for inadequate reception conditions, lack of legal safeguards, and insufficient protection of vulnerable populations. These deficiencies not only raise profound ethical and legal concerns but also risk fueling social tensions and undermining the legitimacy of state institutions.

Social integration of migrants and refugees presents an equally pressing challenge. The underfunding and fragmentation of integration policies across the Balkans result in widespread marginalization and social exclusion. Xenophobia and nationalist rhetoric—sometimes amplified by political actors seeking short-term gains—exacerbate these divisions and hinder efforts to build cohesive, inclusive societies. Effective integration requires comprehensive, rights-based policies that facilitate access to education, employment, healthcare, and community engagement. Civil society organizations play a pivotal role in filling gaps, advocating for migrant rights, and fostering intercultural dialogue. Yet, their potential is often constrained by limited resources and political pressures.

Given these complexities, a comprehensive and multi-layered approach is imperative for sustainably addressing migration governance in the Western Balkans. Institutional strengthening, including judicial reform and capacity building for migration and asylum agencies, is essential to ensure that laws are not only adopted but enforced fairly and transparently. Rights-based border management must become a cornerstone of policy, balancing the need for security with adherence to international human rights standards. Oversight mechanisms, accountability frameworks, and independent monitoring can help prevent abuses and build public trust.

The role of the European Union remains critical but requires recalibration. Enhanced financial and technical assistance should be made more flexible and responsive to the evolving realities on the ground. The EU must foster genuine partnerships with Western Balkan states, moving beyond hierarchical conditionality toward inclusive dialogue and shared decision-making. Such an approach can empower local actors, increase policy legitimacy, and encourage sustainable reform. Furthermore, greater emphasis on regional cooperation within the Balkans can facilitate coordinated responses to migration challenges, promote best practice exchange, and mitigate cross-border tensions.

Addressing social integration demands targeted investments in programs that promote language acquisition, vocational training, and access to social services. Anti-xenophobia campaigns, public education initiatives, and community led projects are vital to countering discrimination and fostering social cohesion. Supporting and empowering civil society actors can enhance these efforts, ensuring that the voices of migrants and refugees are included in policy dialogues.

In addition to state and EU-level efforts, the international community has a role to play in supporting the Western Balkans migration governance. Multilateral cooperation, knowledge sharing, and the mobilization of development assistance can strengthen regional capacities and improve humanitarian outcomes. The complexity of migration in the Balkans demands holistic, rights-centered approaches that recognize migration as both a challenge and an opportunity for regional development.

Ultimately, the future stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans are intimately linked to the region's ability to navigate the intricacies of migration governance effectively. Failure to address governance weaknesses, human rights concerns, and integration deficits risks perpetuating cycles of instability and undermining the EU's enlargement agenda. Conversely, a well-managed, inclusive migration policy can contribute to social cohesion, economic growth,

and democratic consolidation, reinforcing the Balkans' path toward European integration.

In conclusion, sustainable migration governance in the Western Balkans requires balancing security priorities with respect for human rights, fostering institutional capacity alongside social inclusion, and promoting genuine partnerships grounded in mutual trust and shared interests. This integrated approach will not only benefit migrants and host communities but will also strengthen the broader European project of peace, stability, and solidarity.

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