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Mixed migration in the Western Balkans: Shifting policies, smuggling dynamics and risks

PAPER

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This research paper examines evolving smuggling dynamics and the protection risks faced by refugees and migrants¹ in the Western Balkans² in light of increased anti-smuggling efforts and the implementation of broader EU migration policy since early 2023. The research is based on 17 interviews with refugees and migrants, 24 key informant interviews, and a review of secondary sources. It provides an overview of changes as of mid-2024, following the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) June 2023 study. Conducted in partnership with the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) Europe's Protecting Rights at Borders (PRAB) initiative³, this report aims to contribute to a better understanding of shifting mixed migration trends and dynamics in the region and to contribute to identifying solutions in the Western Balkans, in particular regarding DRC's work in protecting refugees and migrants in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- 1 In this paper, 'refugees and migrants' is an umbrella term that includes asylum seekers.
- 2 The six states making up the Western Balkans are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Data on irregular arrivals comes from governments and Frontex and is compared with first-time asylum claims but remains an approximation.
- 3 The Protecting Rights at Borders (PRAB) initiative is a network of organizations focused on monitoring and addressing human rights violations, specifically illegal pushbacks, at the EU's borders. PRAB documents these incidents, supports legal action, and advocates for accountability, ensuring that border management complies with international and European human rights laws: <https://pro.drc.ngo/what-we-do/core-sectors/protection/pushback-protecting-rights-at-borders/>

Key findings

- **Anti-smuggling efforts increase and (recorded) irregular arrivals decrease.** There is increased political focus on toughening border management and targeting people smugglers in the Western Balkans. This has coincided with a reduction in the numbers transiting the Western Balkans (according to government and Frontex detections), with a major drop-off at the end of November 2023.
- **However, data have limitations as not all refugees and migrants encounter authorities** and therefore feature in official statistics. Irregular detections also depend on the competence and motivation of national border police and interior ministries to collect and share data properly and transparently. Key informants cited increased incentives for governments in the region to underplay the arrival figures as evidence that considerable investments in border security were working.
- **Syrians, Afghans, remain prominent** among refugee and migrants moving along the Western Balkan routes according to official data. There has also been a steady increase in Türkiye nationals along the route aided by visa-free entry to Western Balkan countries.
- **Despite decreased numbers of refugees and migrants transiting through the Western Balkans, the route remains active.** Mounting pressures in key host and transit countries, such as Türkiye, Iran, and Lebanon, appear to contribute to driving onward movements through the region.
- **Smuggler networks are adapting to tighter border enforcement and anti-smuggling initiatives.** Key informants report that smuggling activities in the region have shifted from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina due to tightening controls along the Serbia/Hungary border. Smugglers seem to increasingly use encrypted digital platforms and maintain distance from their customers via the use of intermediaries to avoid detection.
- **Tighter border controls have resulted in greater reliance of refugees and migrants on smugglers.** This has resulted in greater vulnerability with key informants reporting a higher likelihood of refugees and migrants experiencing violence, instances of exploitation and extortion by smugglers.
- **Harsh conditions en route persist** including a lack of basic necessities such as food and water, continuing to pose health risks and increases refugee and migrant vulnerabilities.
- **Reports of pushbacks, violence and detention by authorities continue and have increased along some borders.** As of mid-2024 some key informants report increased pushbacks, more frequent and often violent encounters with authorities and heightened risk of detention.
- **Increased funding for border management and anti-smuggling operations has not equated to more funding for much needed protection responses.** Key informants broadly agree that the EU's focus on migration management overshadows its support for protection needs. International humanitarian presence and funding have decreased, resulting in fewer resources to support organisations on the ground to respond to the needs of refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans.
- **The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum may increase pressure on Western Balkan countries to align with stricter EU migration policies.** Accelerated asylum and return procedures, may lead to increased detention. These measures risk overwhelming reception systems, leading to prolonged detention in poor conditions, and reduced access to fair asylum processes. Additionally, tougher border controls, enhanced data-sharing and anti-smuggling operations could push people toward more dangerous routes, increasing their reliance on smugglers and exposing them to greater risks of exploitation and abuse. Anticipated monitoring mechanisms may be insufficient to address abuses and safeguard refugee and migrant rights.

“Countries in the Western Balkans, such as Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, have implemented stricter border controls and security measures. This has increased the risks for migrants attempting irregular crossings, increasing the possibility of arrest, deportation, or exploitation by smugglers.”

Key informant, Albania

Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its member states regard countries in the Western Balkans as crucial strategic partners in strengthening their border management. In response to an increase in migration through the Balkans towards Western Europe in 2022, the EU intensified its focus on the region, dedicating resources to reinforcing border control measures and strengthening reception and asylum systems in non-EU countries. These efforts have included anti-smuggling initiatives alongside a suite of tighter regional migration management policies.

While these efforts appear to have coincided with a decrease in the official number of refugees and migrants detected transiting through the Western Balkans in 2023 and early 2024, the route remains active with refugees and migrants continuing to try to reach Western Europe every month. Additionally, tougher anti-smuggling measures may be resulting in the use of alternative, more covert routes, contributing to the decrease in detected crossings.

Thus, several questions arise: How have mixed migration dynamics evolved in light of tighter regional migration management efforts in the Western Balkans? How have increased and better coordinated anti-smuggling efforts influenced smuggling dynamics? And how has this stricter border enforcement affected refugees and migrants who continue to travel along these routes?

The paper provides an overview of EU migration policy developments in the Western Balkans, focusing on the implementation of anti-smuggling measures. It examines shifts in smuggling routes and operations, and the experiences of people on the move, under stricter migration management. The report also considers the further potential impact which the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum may have on smuggling dynamics and the protection risks facing refugees and migrants in the region.

Methodology

This paper is based on analysis from 17 interviews with refugees and migrants, 24 key informant interviews, and a desk review of relevant published research and news articles complemented the primary research. Qualitative

data collection was undertaken between June 7th to July 24th, 2024, primarily by researchers based in Western Balkan countries.

Interviews

Profiles of refugee and migrant interviewees

17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugees and migrants. Interview questions ranged from general experiences during the journey and protection risks, to experiences with smugglers, as well as questions on general trends such as routes and movement intentions.

- Interviewees came from Afghanistan (6) and Syria (3), plus one each from India, Pakistan, and Iraq.
- 5 interviews were conducted with Albanian nationals, four of whom had migrated irregularly to Western Europe between 2020 and 2024, and were returnees.
- 11 of the interviewees were men and 6 were women.

- 10 of the interviewees were under 30, and 7 above 30 years old.

- Most of the participants were either traveling alone (9) or with family (7), only one was travelling with a non-family group.

Most of the participants were unemployed or were in low-wage employment before migration. Nearly half completed either part or the entirety of their secondary education. Five participants had lived in a country outside of their country of origin before reaching their country of interview. They included a Syrian man who spent several years in Lebanon, four Afghans who lived previously in both Türkiye and Iran.

Profiles of key informants

24 key informants were interviewed across a variety of stakeholder groups, in person and online, who are largely based along the Western Balkan route and could provide insight into migration dynamics. 13 informants were working for NGOs, 2 for international organizations, 5

were government representatives, 2 were journalists, 1 worked for a think tank, and 1 for a public institution (university). Key informants' expertise was in specific areas such as general migration trends or protection, or smuggling dynamics and anti-smuggling efforts.

Limitations

Fieldwork took place on a short timeline, with all interviews planned and completed during a six-week period from 7th June to 24th July 2024. This created challenges in ensuring a diverse sample base among refugee and

migrant interviewees, however key nationalities (Afghan, Syrian) were included.

Ethics

Interviewers explained the purpose of the research in detail before obtaining consent from interviewees. Interviewees were reminded that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time. Interviewees gave consent verbally, recorded on transcripts, or in writing.

Key informants were asked to reaffirm their consent for their shared data to be included in the study by email following the interview. No quotes are attributed to named individuals or organization.

Findings

Strengthening border security and visa policy remain EU priorities

The EU continues to see the Western Balkans as an important partner in general, and specifically in tackling irregular migration as part of its external action policy. In 2022, due to an increase in migration through the Balkans toward Western Europe, the EU renewed its focus on the region with the Action Plan on the Western Balkans.⁴ This plan prioritized strengthening border management beyond the EU's borders and enhancing the reception and asylum systems in non-EU countries.⁵

“Through various funding programs and initiatives, the EU has provided substantial financial and logistical support to countries along the Western Balkans route. This support includes improving border management, enhancing reception

facilities, and ensuring better access to basic services [...]. Having said that, they have a strong cooperation with the state, but they completely neglected people on the move.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

Migration policy developments since then have included the expansion of Frontex activity at EU borders, a step up in border security by Bulgaria and Romania, both of which partially joined the Schengen area of free movement in 2024, restrictions on visa-free access to Western Balkans countries, the operationalization of Italy's external asylum processing deal with Albania, and a significant increase in anti-smuggling operations, notably at the Bulgaria-Türkiye border and with Serbia (see Figure 1 below).

⁴ European Commission (2022) [EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans](#)

⁵ MSF (2024) [Death, despair and destitution: The human costs of the EU's migration policies](#)

Figure 1: Key migration policy developments in the Western Balkans, 2023-24

Month	Policy event
March 2023	Launch of “Pilot Project for fast asylum and return procedures with Bulgaria” ⁶ Joint Serbia-Romania border patrols start under parallel pilot programme. ⁷
April 2023	Agreement between North Macedonia and Frontex implemented. ⁸
April 2023	Serbia introduces visas for Cuban nationals, ⁹ restricting air entry and contributing to near zero detections of irregular border crossings by Cubans in 2024. ¹⁰
February 2024	Albania Parliament ratifies deal that will see Italy process asylum applications outside its territory. ¹¹
March 2024	Bulgaria and Romania partially join Schengen, with controls remaining at land borders. ¹²
April 2024	Agreement of EU Pact on Migration and Asylum complete after EU Parliament endorsement. ¹³
May 2024	The project “Strengthening the regional cooperation on migration management between Western Balkans and neighbouring EU Member States in accordance with EU Acquis and international standards (MIRCO)” is implemented by the Swedish Migration Agency through a collaboration with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration in Serbia. ¹⁴
June 2024	Deal signed by the European Union and Serbia allowing for FRONTEX’s deployment anywhere on Serbia’s territory. ¹⁵
June 2024	European Parliament elections see more right-wing, anti-immigration MEPs elected.
Late 2024	Bosnia and Herzegovina likely to become formal candidate for EU membership.
2025	Final projects under EU-Türkiye deal contracted to end.

In April 2024, the European Parliament has also approved the regulations of the Pact on Migration and Asylum¹⁶, the culmination of several years of sometimes-contentious negotiation, in particular around the notion of ‘responsibility sharing’. The ratification of the Pact was followed by June 2024 Parliament elections, which

resulted in gains for parties of the far-right, although the centre ground coalition holds.¹⁷ Practical elements of the Pact of particular relevance to the Western Balkans include an accelerated border procedure, including likely increased returns to Western Balkan countries, enhanced data-sharing and anti-smuggling operations.

6 European Commission (2024a) [Reporting on the Results of the Pilot Project for Fast Asylum and Return Procedures with Bulgaria](#)
7 European Commission (2024b) [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, and the Council: Striking a Balance on Migration: An Approach That Is Both Fair and Firm](#)
8 European Council (2023) [Border management: EU concludes agreement with North Macedonia on Frontex cooperation](#)
9 AP News (2023) [For Cuban Asylum Seekers, Options Dwindle after Serbia Slaps Restrictions on Visas to Curb Migration](#)
10 Frontex monthly figures January to May 2024.
11 Reuters (2024a) [Albanian Parliament Ratifies Migration Centres Deal with Italy](#)
12 European Commission (2024c) [Bulgaria and Romania join the Schengen area](#)
13 European Commission (2024d) [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)
14 Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) (2024) [Strengthening the regional cooperation on migration management between Western Balkans and neighbouring EU Member States in accordance with EU Acquis and international standards](#)
15 EU (June 2024) [EU signs agreement with Serbia to strengthen migration and border management cooperation](#)
16 The Pact on Migration and Asylum is a legislative programme setting out a common EU approach to the management and protection of migrants and refugees who seek to enter the EU irregularly. It includes enhanced screening, faster asylum border procedure, more sophisticated migration and border management, and fundamental rights monitoring. The details of how it will be implemented will be set forth in a Common Implementation Plan, which will be operationalized through national plans by the start of 2026. See also: [European Commission \(2020\) Pact on Migration and Asylum - European Commission](#)
17 For an analysis of the impact of the elections of mixed migration please see Horwood, C. Forin, R. (2024) [Hard winds coming: Impacts of the EU elections for mixed migration](#)

Anti-smuggling activities increase

“ In the past six months, the police have been working intensively to suppress smuggling, encouraged by EU funds. However, the actions seem more focused on preventing entry and passage through Serbia rather than addressing violence against migrants.”

Key informant, humanitarian, Serbia

Among key informants interviewed for this study there was consensus that anti-smuggling activities had intensified across the region. In Serbia, anti-smuggling efforts increased at the end of 2023, as Serbian police launched a major crackdown on migrant smuggling, dismantling armed groups operating near the Hungarian border and arresting numerous smugglers in collaboration with other actors including anti-terrorist units.¹⁸ The crackdown was triggered by increasing violence between smuggling groups near the Serbian-Hungarian border, escalating tensions, and pressure from the EU for Serbia to address the issue, especially ahead of upcoming parliamentary elections.¹⁹

“The recent surge in police activities has been driven by significant incidents, such as the recent armed clash in Horgoš, North Serbia. However, it’s essential to recognize that these enhanced efforts have been ongoing for nearly a year, reflecting a sustained commitment by the Ministry of Interior. [...] Although the police have been successful in identifying and detaining many smugglers and irregular migrants... many criminal cases do not seem to progress to court.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one key informant noted that as smugglers began increasingly operating out of Bosnia, due to the hostile environment in Serbia, there have been more police raids in Bosnia trying to track down specific smuggling rings as well as arrests of smugglers. According to key informants, anti-smuggling efforts in Albania have also manifested in the reinforcement of border police collaborating with the police of neighbouring countries such as Greece, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, as well as intensified investigations of smuggling operations and more severe punishments for those involved in smuggling. Authorities in Albania have also increased the use of technology and social media to monitor smuggling operations.

“ Anti-smuggling efforts have intensified, particularly with international cooperation, Frontex presence, and increased border securitization measures. There has been some improvement in terms of regional cooperation and information sharing, but the pervasive corruption and resource limitations hinder significant progress.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

EU initiatives, such as by Frontex and Europol, have been assisting law enforcement agencies throughout the Western Balkans in their anti-smuggling efforts through funding for joint operations, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and capacity-building programs to improve investigative capabilities. In early 2024 this year, a large-scale investigation by Europol’s Operational Task Force (OTF), which involved law enforcement and judicial authorities from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia, dismantled smuggling networks active along the Western Balkan route. The investigation led to the arrest of 19 smugglers.²⁰

However, several key informants noted that anti-smuggling efforts, although largely publicized, fall short of adequately addressing migrant smuggling. Key informants interviewed for this research pointed out that smugglers adapt quickly to enforcement strategies,

18 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2024) [Serbian police crackdown disrupts smuggling of migrants, but for how long?](#)

19 Ibid.

20 Europol (2024) [19 Smugglers Arrested in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia](#)

and that arrests usually take place at the lower levels, rather than capturing major smuggling leaders. Many mentioned that alongside migrant smuggling initiatives there must be safe and legal passages for refugees and migrants to travel through the region, as well as improved systems for those who seek asylum.

“Anti-smuggling efforts have largely been publicized but there has been no success by police in infiltrating smuggling operations; arrests usually take place for smugglers at the lower levels but there have been no arrests of major smuggling leaders or key smuggling networks.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

“Anti-smuggling efforts have become more coordinated and effective, with cross-border cooperation. Everyone is just talking about smuggling all the time. However, smugglers continuously adapt, so sustained efforts are needed. There have

been improvements in training and oversight, but challenges remain in fully eradicating these networks.”

Key informant, government, Serbia

“I believe that there are no differences in terms of the efficiency of anti-smuggling efforts compared to the previous period.”

Key informant, humanitarian, Serbia

“Overall, while there have been improvements in the intensity and coordination of anti-smuggling efforts, there remains a need for more effective judicial follow-up and comprehensive protection mechanisms to address the root causes of smuggling and provide safer alternatives for migrants.”

Key informant, international organization, Serbia

Mixed migration continues, although numbers show an overall decline

While the Western Balkans route remains active, diverse sources show an overall drop in the official numbers of refugees and migrants recorded arriving to and transiting through the region in 2024 (see Figure 2). This is within the context of a reduction in irregular migration into the EU in early 2024 across some routes, namely the Central Mediterranean route, with numbers overall remaining far below the ‘peaks’ of 2015.²¹ This follows a fluctuation in

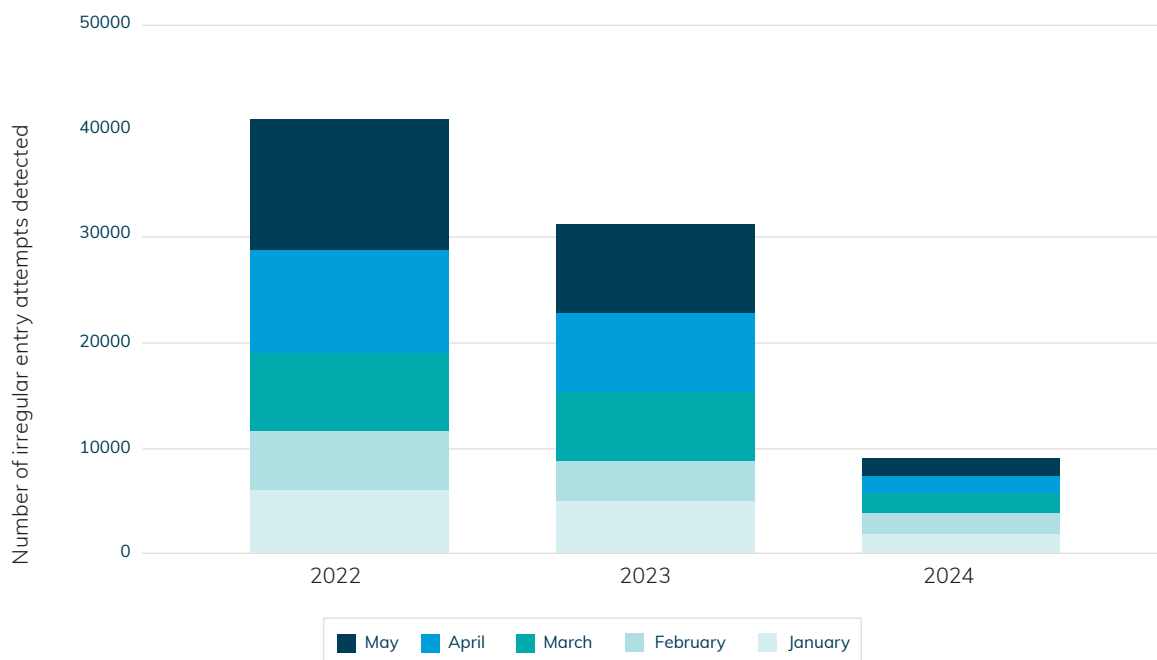
detections across the Western Balkan route in 2023 and drop off toward the end of the year: in the third quarter of 2023, Frontex recorded a spike in detections, which was then followed by a sudden drop.²² The number of “registered on arrival” recorded by IOM broadly mirrored the spike in overall detections recorded by Frontex, with a peak in early summer then a steady decline from August 2023 to the end of the year.²³

21 Frontex (2024) [EU External Borders: Irregular Border Crossings Fall One Third in the First Half of 2024](#)

22 Data downloaded from: Frontex (2024) [Migratory Map](#). Last accessed July 11, 2024

23 IOM (2024) [Western Balkans — Mixed Migratory Flows Report - March](#)

Figure 2. Irregular border detections in the Western Balkans - comparing the first five months of the year across 2022, 2023, and 2024, Frontex²⁴



Box 1. Limitations of the data

There is little certainty about the numbers of refugees and migrants moving to, and through the Western Balkans. Approximate estimates are drawn together comparing detections of irregular movements, surveys such as IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) and Flow Monitoring Registry (FMR), and first-time asylum application figures in the EU. However, these estimates only represent refugees and migrants who have encountered officials and do not include those who remain undetected.

Irregular detections depend on national border police and interior ministries to collect and share data properly and transparently. Key informants interviewed cited incentives for officials to underplay figures as evidence that investments in border security were working.

Irregular detections count attempts, not number of people. Increasingly strict border controls may mean that more attempts are needed per person to successfully enter the Western Balkans, potentially leading to refugees and migrants being counted multiple times.²⁵ It is also possible that people may be moving in more clandestine ways to avoid detection.

Ad-hoc surveys are non-representative and biased towards those who move slowly enough through the region to be surveyed and are able to be detected.

First-time asylum application figures in the EU only given a broad overview and do not include a breakdown of who has transited the Western Balkans and do not include people who have transited but did not seek asylum.

24 Figures are indicative. Frontex statistics count detected attempts, not people. Therefore, the numbers presented reflect in part the operational approach and capacity of national law enforcement agencies submitting statistics to Frontex and irregular migration/smuggling trends that affect the number and nature of border crossing attempts. Data downloaded from: Frontex (2024c) Migratory Map. Last accessed July 11, 2024.

25 This is suggested by Frontex (2024b) [Annual Risk Analysis 2024-2025](#)

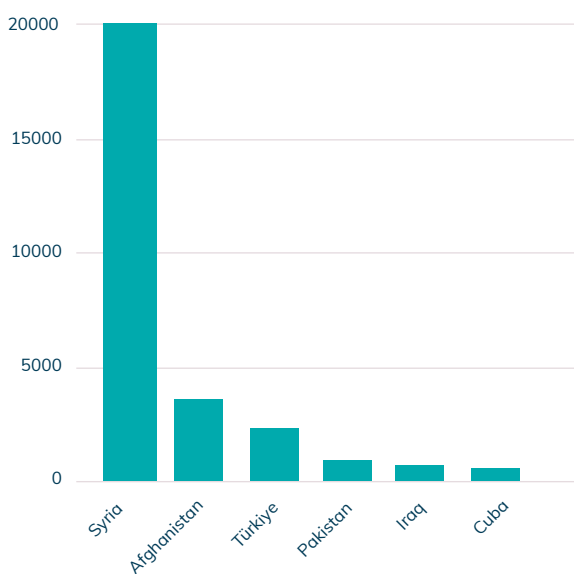
Syrian, Türkiye and Afghan nationals top three nationalities detected

In both 2023 and to mid-2024, Syrians, Afghans and nationals from Türkiye were the top three nationalities of refugees and migrants as recorded by Frontex (see Figure 3). Syrians continue to make up the largest group of refugees and migrants intercepted along the Western Balkans route across both 2023 and to mid-2024. Since 2023, there has been increasing numbers of nationals from Türkiye²⁶ detected - now the second largest group

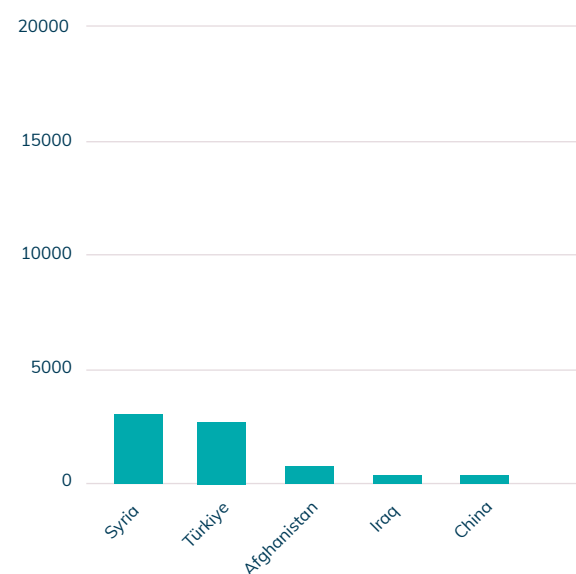
detected between Jan-May 2024, as compared to the same timeframe in 2023. This trend is reflected in EU first-time asylum application statistics whereby applications from nationals from Türkiye nearly doubled in 2023 as compared to the previous year.²⁷ Afghan nationals continued to travel along the route, though in lower numbers compared to Syrians and nationals from Türkiye.

Figure 3. Top nationalities detected on the Western Balkans route, January – May 2023 vs. January – May 2024²⁸

Top five nationalities detected, January to May 2023 (Frontex)



Top five nationalities detected, January to May 2024 (Frontex)



Asides from refugees and migrants from Syria, Türkiye and Afghanistan, nine other nationalities were recorded by Frontex along the Western Balkans route between 2023 and mid- 2024.²⁹ The first half of 2024 also saw an increase in arrivals of Russians and Chinese nationals, who are able to enter some Western Balkan countries under visa free schemes, before crossing irregularly into the EU. This is a change from 2022 when nationals of Burundi, India, and Tunisia made use of visa-free entry

before visa rules changed for these nationalities as part of steps, mainly by Serbia, to harmonise visa rules with the EU. The slightly increased presence of Chinese nationals on the route into 2024 may be indicative of a broader upward trend³⁰, with a subtle-but-evident corresponding increase in asylum applications in the EU, mainly in Italy, France, and Germany.³¹ However, this will need to be monitored further into 2024 before any concrete conclusions can be drawn.

²⁶ Türkiye nationals can enter the region aided by visa-free entry to Serbia (since 2010) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 2005).

²⁷ An 82% increase to 101,000. EASO. European Union Agency for Asylum. (2023) [EU Received over 1.1 Million Asylum Applications in 2023](#)

²⁸ Figures are drawn from Frontex aggregated data on detections. They are indicative as. Frontex statistics count detected attempts, not people.

²⁹ From Iraq, China, Morocco, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, India, Somalia, Nepal.

³⁰ See also: Guardian (2024) [A path towards freedom: the new route to Europe for desperate Chinese migrants](#)

³¹ Eurostat monthly first-time asylum figures show 1,105 applications from Chinese nationals Jan-March 2024 compared to 640 in the same period in 2023. Last accessed 24 July 2024.

“The Bosnian route remains predominantly used by men from Afghanistan and Syria, many of whom spent years in Türkiye or Greece before moving on. Recently, there’s also been an increase in Kurdish families from Türkiye or Iraq, and people from Pakistan, Bangladesh. Some also come from

North Africa. However, the route has become increasingly unsafe due to police violence and a lack of humanitarian support. Additionally, there was a brief influx of migrants from Burundi due to Serbia’s visa-free regime, which now ended.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia.

Pressures driving onward movements from host and transit countries contributes to keeping the route active

The reasons for migration along the Western Balkans, as with irregular migration to Europe more generally, result from protracted political and security crises in countries of origin as well as economic insecurity. These primary drivers have remained relatively consistent since MMC’s 2023 report. Respondents interviewed under this study, mention various reasons for leaving, including economic insecurity, political turmoil and persecution.

threats to our family, we decided to leave Afghanistan and go to Europe.”

Afghan man, interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina

“I tried so many times to get a work visa for Europe from Pakistan, but it never worked out. I’m from Kashmir, which is always in turmoil because of the political situation, and I couldn’t find a job there. So, I decided to go to Europe.”

Pakistani man, interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina

“Living in Syria was extremely difficult due to the ongoing conflict. The constant threat of violence and lack of basic necessities made life unbearable. I left because I feared for my safety and wanted a better future for myself and my family.”

Syrian man, interviewed in Serbia

“I am from Afghanistan, you all know that Afghanistan has been controlled by the Taliban for the last two years, My father was a soldier. The Taliban killed my father after taking control. Because of these

Increasingly, the ongoing precarity, difficulty accessing livelihoods, and increasing anti-foreigner sentiment in major host and transit countries such as Türkiye, Iran and Lebanon, appear to be a contributing factor to movements along this route. Türkiye, Iran host large numbers of refugees and migrants from neighbouring countries who have been met with intensifying anti-migrant sentiment³² and increased risk of deportations and expulsions. Similar dynamics can also be seen in Lebanon – a major host countries of Syrians. Alongside increased cost of living pressures, this has incentivised some to move onwards in search of opportunities, safety and to avoid return.

One Syrian respondent interviewed in Serbia for this research left Lebanon after residing there for seven years,

32 Frontex (2024b). [Op. Cit.](#)

as the worsening economic situation made it increasingly difficult to remain. A respondent from Afghanistan had resided in Iran for about 2 years, noting “everything was difficult, and we knew nothing is going to get better for us.” One key informant also detailed the increased difficulties particularly Syrians experience in Türkiye, including struggles to receive temporary protection, risk of arrest and deportation.

Surveys regularly conducted by IOM with migrants transiting through the Western Balkan thus far in 2024³³ show that respondents who that been living in a country other than their country of origin for a year or more, frequently cited deteriorating economic conditions, fear of

deportation and personal or targeted violence as reasons for moving on. Among those surveyed in July, about half had engaged in secondary movements: the majority had been living in Türkiye, followed by lesser numbers in Greece, Bulgaria, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates.³⁴ These dynamics impact nationals of these countries as well: interviews with nationals from Türkiye conducted by IOM in Bosnia and Herzegovina in early 2024 reveal most respondents came from provinces that had been affected by the earthquake the year prior, and most cited economic reasons for deciding to leave, while some also stated they were leaving Türkiye due to their political or religious beliefs.³⁵

Air arrival to the region remains an option for some – although EU seeks visa entry harmonization

Alongside land routes into the Western Balkans, some nationalities are able to enter by air through visa-on-arrival schemes before often continuing irregularly into Europe. However, the number of nationalities able to fly into the region by air is changing fast, as countries within the Western Balkans update their visa policies to align with those of the EU more closely, as part of accession plans. For example, during 2022, Cuban nationals were able to fly into Belgrade and receive a visa-on-arrival,

then seek asylum or otherwise connect with smugglers for onward journeys into the European Union. Serbia’s introduction of stricter visa requirements for Cuban nationals in April 2023 was followed by a decrease in the number of irregular detections among Cubans.³⁶ A similar situation was seen in 2022, among Burundi and Indian nationals who were able to previously enter the Western Balkans by air before they were met with tightened visa requirements.

Land arrivals and routes through the region remain fluid, adapting to enforcement practices and operational activities of smuggling networks

Overall, the migration landscape in the Balkans remains fluid, with routes and preferences adapting to enforcement practices and the operational activities of smuggling networks. Despite efforts to “close” or restrict these routes, they remain active, with specific paths and modes of operation changing over time.

“ Recently, migrants primarily enter Serbia through Bulgaria only. From there, they travel north, northwest towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, skipping Belgrade. The routes are constantly shifting due to police raids and the actions of smuggling

networks. Migration in the Balkans is a constant, although the route has been “cancelled” many times. Only variations are the choices of routes and whether the number of arrivals will sometimes increase or decrease. Many of these described activates depends a lot on the current smuggling networks, but also on the adjustments of migrants and their choices.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

33 See IOM (2024) [Migrant Mobility Situation Report in the Western Balkans \(January – July\)](#)

34 IOM (2024) [Migrant Mobility Situation Report the Western Balkans – July](#)

35 IOM (2024) [Migrant Mobility Situation Report the Western Balkans – February](#)

36 AP News (2023) [Op. Cit.](#)

This adaptability is reflected in the shifting routes, such as preference by some for entering the Western Balkans through Bulgaria rather than Greece, due to tighter border controls and pushbacks in Greece. However, while some might see the Bulgarian route as more accessible, with more “holes in border fences”, it holds its challenges, with violent pushbacks reported as well.³⁷

“People are going more through Bulgaria rather than Greece for the last year because Greece has fortified the border very well and the pushbacks are very persistent... whereas Bulgaria has more holes in its border fences. ... [However] Bulgaria has more violent pushbacks, but in Greece there is not much border authorities being involved in smuggling networks. In Bulgaria, there is more authority involvement in smuggling networks.”

Key informant, NGO, Bulgaria

“Stricter controls in Türkiye and Greece have pushed more people towards the North Macedonian and Bulgarian routes.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

“Increased border controls and stricter immigration policies in the EU have pushed migrants to seek alternative, less-monitored paths... Frontex presence has also impacted migrant routes. These collaborations have [made] traditional routes more challenging... pushing migrants towards less fortified borders.”

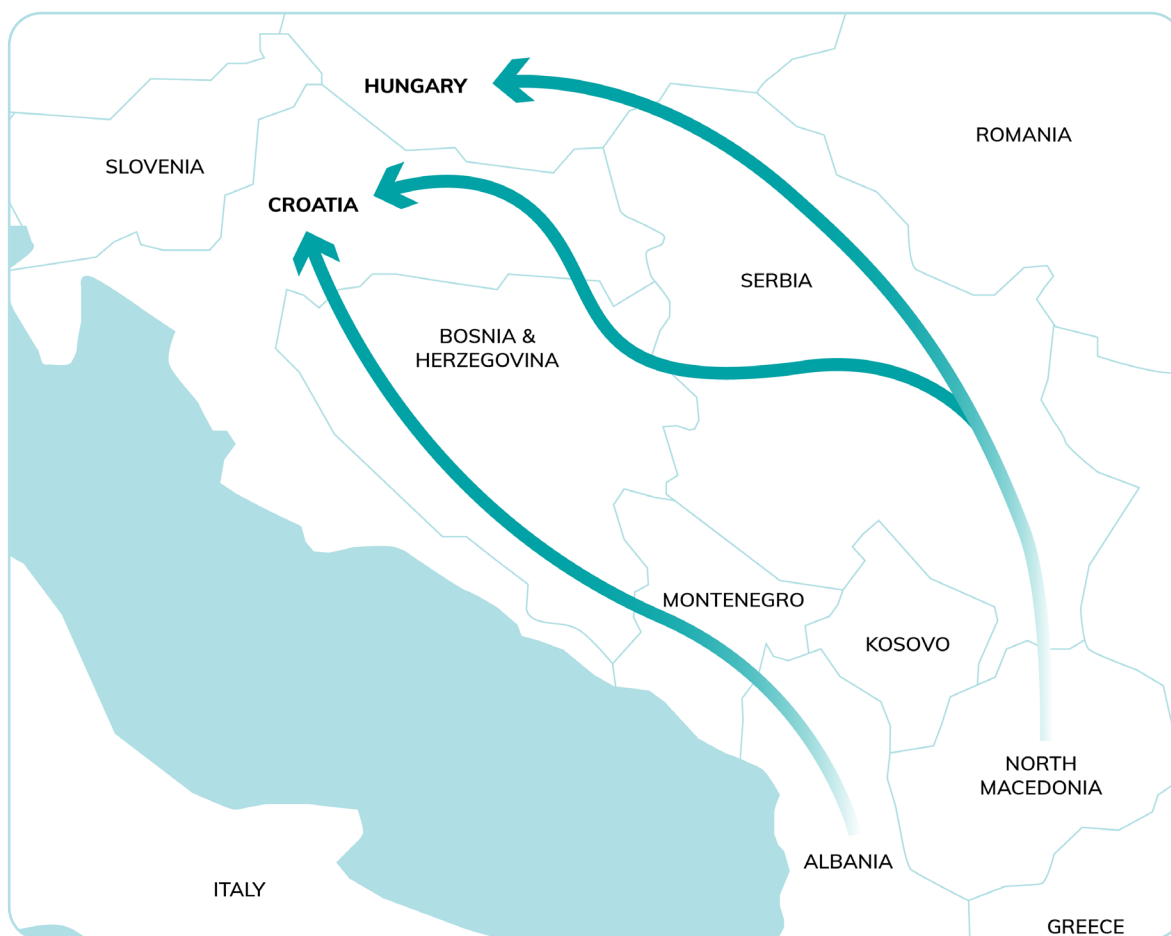
Key informant, NGO, Serbia

Informants agree that refugees and migrants predominantly enter Serbia through the southern borders with North Macedonia and Bulgaria. From these points, the most common routes lead north towards Hungary or Croatia. As of early 2024 according to key informants and refugees and migrants interviewed the main routes through the Western Balkans included:

1. North Macedonia to Serbia and either (1) exit into Hungary, or (2) transit through Bosnia and Herzegovina before exit into Croatia.
2. Albania to Montenegro, to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and exit into Croatia.

³⁷ see also ECRE (2024) [Balkan Route: Continued Concerns About Migrant Pushbacks from Bulgaria to Türkiye — NGOs Blame Hungary's Migration Policy for Boosting Smuggling Networks — EU Set to Sign Frontex Co-operation Agreement with Serbia](#)

Map 2. Approximate smuggling routes in the Western Balkans, 2024



Increasing numbers of people are moving through Bosnia and Herzegovina, smugglers shift central point of operation

In a departure from earlier years, key informants report that an increasing number of people are now traveling through Bosnia and Herzegovina, as opposed to Serbia and across the border into Hungary. Key informants cited that the Bosnia-Croatia border is now perceived by refugees and migrants as significantly easier to cross compared to the Serbia-Hungary border.

“Recent police operations in Subotica and Horgoš [at the Serbian-Hungary border] have underscored the area’s significance as a transit hub... many migrants are now transiting through

Bosnia due to the increased police presence and raids in Serbia throughout 2024.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

“In late 2023, the Serbian ministry of Interior placed pressure on migrants on the move, moving them to camps and segregating them. This resulted in migrants deciding not to travel through

Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, but to go through Bosnia and Herzegovina into the EU. In 2023 and the first months of 2024, this route through Bosnia and Herzegovina was being very frequently used by migrants.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“Croatian police was always very aggressive, but this stopped in the beginning of 2023; they don’t pay much attention to migrants anymore. This is why migrants prefer the Bosnian route. Police have turned a blind eye because of corruption (police connections with smugglers). In the countries where border police have an average salary, you get more money if you turn a blind eye to migrants being smuggled.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

The increased popularity of the route through Bosnia and Herzegovina is likely due to several factors: stricter border enforcement by Serbia at the Hungarian border, the relocation of refugees and migrants to camps by Serbian authorities, and the perception that Croatian police are relatively less violent than in previous years³⁸ and more easily bribed than their Hungarian counterparts, thus making the Bosnia-Croatia border easier to cross compared to the Serbia-Hungary border.

“They’re less visible. Migrant activities there are functioning better. Bosnia was always an alternative route; it is not an easy pathway, and when you get to Bosnia, there’s not a great institutional response, and it’s not very safe there. There was also a lot of police pressure at the Bosnia/Croatia border. This stopped a year and a half ago, and the route through Bosnia to get to Croatia is less visible. Smuggling gangs were operating mainly out of Bosnia and Herzegovina recently, making it easier for migrants to pass.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

Smugglers adapt to increased enforcement efforts, become more covert

In response to increased enforcement, smugglers are continuously altering and diversifying their modus operandi to avoid detection. According to key informants, smugglers have become increasingly professional, and also leverage social media platforms, such as TikTok, Facebook, and encrypted messaging apps like Telegram and Signal, to advertise their services, communicate with clients, and coordinate operations. This allows them to evade authorities more effectively.

“Smugglers use more covert routes, smaller groups, and technological means like encrypted communications to avoid detection. They know where thermal and visual cameras are, they know positions of the drones and police dogs, they are familiar with everything.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

38 This echoes an observation in 2023 that since joining Schengen, Croatia had adopted a less aggressive approach to policing its border. See Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Western Balkans: Mixed Migration Trends and Dynamics](#). However, there are also reports of migrants being violently beaten and pushed back by Croatian border police in 2024., see ECRE (2024) [Balkan Route: Migrants Risk Tranquilizer Addictions — Frontex Triples Staff at Bulgaria-Türkiye Border Ahead of Schengen Expansion — Refugees in Serbia Endure Violence & Harassment — Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Greenlight for Accession Talks Amid Reports of Violence Along Border with Croatia — Decrease in Irregular Crossings Via Western Balkan Route](#).

“Smugglers have increasingly used technology and social networks to advertise their services and find potential customers. They use encrypted messaging apps and social networks to organize the transport of migrants and evade authorities’ control.”

Key informant, Albania

Some interviewees suggest that smugglers are increasingly distancing themselves from direct involvement with their clients, using intermediaries to put distance between themselves and migrants in an effort to avoid detection.

“Smugglers have adapted by minimizing their interactions with migrants and using local populations for ground-level activities.”

Key informant, international organization, Serbia

“The smuggler himself was not with the group because he is a big smuggler and has a big network. He sent a guide with the group.”

Afghan man, interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Harsh environmental conditions en route, heightened risks amid increased border enforcement

As a result of heightened border policing and surveillance, key informants report smuggling operations have shifted towards more covert and sometimes more dangerous routes, forcing refugees and migrants to travel more covertly, such as during the night or in concealed compartments in vehicles.

“The heightened risk has forced migrants to become more cautious and secretive, often traveling in smaller groups or under the cover of night. Many have been diverted to Bosnia due to continuous police raids in Serbia, seeking less monitored paths. Despite these adaptations, the journey remains fraught with danger, and migrants are frequently exposed to violence, exploitation, and inhumane conditions.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

“Starting from the deception to profit from these people [smugglers], physical harm, the risk of sexual abuse, family separation, etc. Other risks include dehydration after traveling for days on foot, suffocation from being in enclosed trucks, the danger of wild animals, robbery, falling into ravines, or even drowning in seas or rivers.”

Key informant, government, Albania

“The most dangerous journey was when crossing the river (Serbia -Bosnia) at night on the rubber boat.”

Indian woman, interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Refugee and migrant interviewees report long walks over difficult terrain, accompanied by a lack of water, food and shelter. One interviewee mentioned having to sleep in the forest because camps in Serbia were full, and another expressed fear at night due to inadequate shelter and the need to hide to avoid detection.

“At night when the border was crossed, the dangerous sounds of the wild animals could be heard, at that time there was a lot of fear. Apart from this, there were shortages of food and water. Migrants used to help each other and there was no provision for help, no one come to help in the forest at night.”

Pakistani man, interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina

“The journey through Serbia was tough. We walked long distances, often through rough terrain. The biggest challenges were finding shelter and avoiding detection by authorities.”

Syrian man, interviewed in Serbia

One key informant mentioned that heightened danger on these routes is exacerbated by some smugglers coercing migrants to taking drugs during the journey to move faster and to evade law enforcement detection. Another key informant said that the transportation of migrants through the Western Balkans has become more hazardous, as there are instances of them being transported in presence of weapons and ammunition.

“With enhanced border controls, smugglers have become more aggressive. Migrants often have no choice but to comply, paying higher fees and taking greater risks. Recent arrests in Subotica revealed that migrants were being transported with weapons and ammunition, highlighting the dangerous conditions they face. For example, police operations

demonstrate the increasingly perilous environment migrants navigate, often resorting to more dangerous routes or relying on corrupt officials to facilitate their passage.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

En route migrants can also face aggression, violence and robbery from local mafia gangs. Key informants and refugees and migrants interviewed reported hearing of incidents of kidnapping for ransom. One key informant mentioned that they don't know whether the perpetrators are smugglers or individuals belonging to an organised crime network. One Syrian respondent interviewed for this research reported that his cousin was kidnapped in North Macedonia near the Serbian border, held for three days and beaten.

“There is an increasingly hostile environment from Serbian locals in recent years e.g. Serbian militants who are extremists and racists.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“We suffered a lot torture on the way, in Montenegro near Bosnia and Herzegovina border, the mafia group caught everyone, robbed, beat us, took away their mobile and money.”

Pakistani man, interviewed in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Increased reliance on smugglers alongside rising violence, exploitation, and extortion

The recent increase in anti-smuggling activities and stricter border management has resulted in a greater reliance on smugglers among migrants. This is compared to findings from MMC's 2023 study, where some refugees and migrants, particular those with lower funds, undertook parts of the journey themselves, including crossing the then already fortified Serbia-Hungary border with minimal involvement of smugglers. Independent border crossings appear to be less feasible in 2024.

“The increase in border controls and stricter enforcement measures have made it more challenging for migrants to cross borders independently, thereby increasing their reliance on smugglers. The desperation to find a safer or quicker route often drives migrants to take these risks, despite the dangers associated with smuggling networks.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“Risks have intensified with more violent encounters with smugglers and increased police crackdowns. In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, migrants face exploitation, robbery, and physical abuse more frequently than lets say a year ago. This all starts in 2023, like there was a directive from someone that they need to stop migration through the Balkans.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

As reported in 2023 by MMC, violence perpetrated by smugglers against their clients appeared to be rare in the Western Balkans.³⁹ However, throughout 2023 and into

early 2024, key informants indicated a rise in violence by smugglers who are experiencing more pressures due to heightened border controls. Some report increased fees with others reporting violence and abuse. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were most frequently cited as locations of this violence by those interviewed.

“They rely heavily on smugglers, there is a lot of violence from smugglers. Previously, people could travel safely but now there is a lot of smuggling violence and police violence. They need to pay a lot of money and spend a lot of time with smugglers.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“Migrants negotiate routes, prices, and false documents with smugglers. Recently, higher fees and more dangerous conditions have characterised these interactions.”

Key informant, journalist, Serbia

“Smugglers ask for more money given the increased risk. It is becoming more difficult to bribe police at the border because the police have surveillance where they keep an eye on each other, and as a result, smugglers ask migrants for more money.”

Key informant, NGO worker

Key informants working for NGOs and refugees and migrants interviewed reported an increase in the exploitation and extortion of refugees and migrants by smugglers along the route. Reports included instances where smugglers misled refugees and migrants, raised their fees while en route and threatened or blackmailed refugees and migrants unable to pay.

39 See Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Op.Cit.](#)

“Smugglers have become more aggressive in their dealings. Migrants often have to negotiate higher fees due to increased risks and tougher border controls. The relationship between migrants and smugglers is increasingly characterized by coercion and exploitation, with smugglers demanding more money for safe passage and often reneging on their promises.”

Key informant, NGO representative

“Recently, the dynamics have become more exploitative, with smugglers demanding higher fees and providing false promises about safe passage. There is a growing mistrust, but migrants still rely on smugglers due to the lack of legal migration routes.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“Smugglers often exploit migrants financially, demanding exorbitant fees for their services and imposing additional costs along the journey. Migrants may be deceived about the total cost or conditions of their journey, leading to severe financial hardship and debt bondage.”

Key informant, government, Albania

“What is known and has happened more often, is the financial dependence created by migrants. Often they are forced to pay higher fees due to unforeseen changes in the smugglers’ plans. These financial obligations then turn into forced labor, slavery, definitely in a trap from which it is difficult to escape.”

Key informant, NGO, Albania

Pushbacks, violence and detention by border police increasingly reported along some borders

Violence and abuse have long been reported by refugees and migrants along the Western Balkans route. MMC’s 2023 study found refugees and migrants experienced violence, exploitation, abuse and pushbacks by border police, law enforcement officials, and other authorities. As of mid-2024 some key informants report increased pushbacks,⁴⁰ more frequent and often violent encounters with authorities and heightened risk of detention. This surge in enforcement seems to be directly linked to growing pressure from the EU, which has pushed for stricter measures to control irregular migration and reduce movement through the region, placing refugees and migrants in increasingly vulnerable positions.

“Reports of pushbacks at borders have also intensified, involving border authorities of all the countries, including Serbia.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“Over the past six months, protection risks have intensified, particularly with increased reports of police presence. In Serbia migrants face heightened risks of

40 See also the latest PRAB reports, which draw on data from protection monitoring activities and legal case referrals: <https://pro.drc.ngo/resources/documents/prab-reports/>

unlawful detention...There has been a notable increase in police and military presence, aimed at curbing smuggling activities and managing migrant flows. This has led to more frequent encounters between migrants and law enforcement, sometimes resulting in violence and heightened fear among migrants.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“The shift in state policy was driven by pressure from the European Union. In the past, fines for illegal entry into Serbia and for movement

without proper documentation were seldom enforced. However, today, such penalties are routinely imposed. The fines are substantial, and offenders often face the possibility of having these financial penalties converted into prison sentences. This stricter enforcement reflects the increased emphasis on controlling illegal migration and aligning with EU expectations.”

Key informant, international organization, Serbia

EU focus on increased border management over protection of the rights of people on the move

While the EU has significantly invested in border management and anti-smuggling operations across the Western Balkans, progress in developing corresponding systems to manage the needs of migrants and refugees who are transiting the region has not kept pace. While some key informants acknowledge EU funding and efforts to facilitate cooperation between countries on migration management, they note that these initiatives are not well implemented and prioritize border management over protecting refugees' and migrants' rights.

“The EU has provided substantial financial and logistical support to countries along the Western Balkans route. This support includes improving border management. they have a strong cooperation with the state, but they completely neglected people on the move.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“International organizations and NGOs provide humanitarian assistance to migrants at several crossing points, including shelter, food and emergency medical care. However, this assistance is limited and cannot cover all the migrants' needs, especially in cases of abuse of any kind and the physical or emotional traumas they may have experienced.”

Key informant, Albania

“The EU has increased funding for border security and anti-smuggling operations but has been criticised for insufficient protection measures. Law enforcement focuses more on preventing entry and passage rather than addressing violence against migrants. While there are efforts to improve recognition and

support systems, comprehensive measures to protect migrant rights are still lacking.”

Key informant, NGO, Serbia

“ Staying in the camps [in Serbia], we faced poor living conditions, especially regarding sanitation and food quality. The uncertainty of our situation and the fear of being sent back were constant mental strains.”

Syrian man, interviewed in Serbia

Key informants report that international humanitarian presence and funding for national and local service providers in the Western Balkans have decreased. The reduction in humanitarian funding globally⁴¹ and in some countries in the Western Balkans specifically, as well as the withdrawal of key actors, such from Bosnia and Herzegovina, are likely to exacerbate the challenges faced by refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans. With fewer resources and organizations on the ground, there will be a significant decrease in the availability of essential services and a reduction in the capacity to monitor and report on human rights abuses.

Anticipated impacts of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

The EU Pact⁴² – not yet actioned – reinforces the relevance of neighboring, non-EU countries such as those in the Western Balkans in migration management. It represents a significant shift in the European Union’s approach to managing migration and asylum, introducing a comprehensive set of ten legislative measures aimed at creating a “European solution”⁴³ to migration challenges. With a focus on border security, including expanding digital surveillance, and accelerating asylum and return procedures, the final agreement has sparked concern among NGOs and civil society, due to potential human rights implications. Critics argue that the Pact could exacerbate human rights violations at Europe’s

borders and outsource asylum responsibilities to non-EU countries. As the implementation phase begins, with key regulations set to take effect by 2026, it remains to be seen whether the EU can balance security with the protection of fundamental rights for migrants and refugees.

The below table outlines how key commitments of the EU Pact will potentially impact refugees and migrants on the move in the Western Balkans.

41 OCHA (2024) [Total reported funding 2024](#)

42 EU Commission (2024e) [What is the Pact on Migration and Asylum?](#)

43 EU Commission (2024f) [Press release: Statement by President von der Leyen on the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum](#)

Figure 4. Potential impacts of key commitments under the EU Pact on people on the move in the Western Balkans

EU Pact commitment EU Pact commitment	Potential outcomes for people on the move in the Western Balkans
Accelerated asylum and return procedures ⁴⁴	The focus on enhanced screening at external borders and fast-tracked asylum and return processes may be mirrored in Western Balkan states in an effort to align with EU standards. If Western Balkan countries are tasked with detaining migrants during asylum processes or returns procedures, while also receiving increased numbers of people returned from the EU, there is a risk of prolonged detention in overcrowded and under-resourced facilities. Human rights concerns, such as lack of access to legal representation and comprehensive asylum procedures, healthcare, and dignified living conditions, are likely to worsen, as is the mental health strain ⁴⁵ on refugees and migrants.
Data-sharing mechanisms	Enhanced data-sharing between the EU and Western Balkan countries could result in increased tracking and monitoring of refugees and migrants as they transit through the region. People apprehended in one country might be identified and sent back to the country of first entry, limiting their ability to reach preferred destinations. Concerns about the protection of personal data and potential misuse could exacerbate mistrust and create additional barriers for people seeking asylum.
Anti-smuggling operational partnerships	Increased anti-smuggling operations could make transit through regions like the Western Balkans riskier and more expensive. It will likely increase dependence on smugglers, increase smuggling prices especially for packages that guarantee success, reflecting increased risk, cost of repeated attempts, and bribes.
Rights monitoring mechanism	The presence of monitoring mechanisms through the EU Fundamental Rights Agency may lead to increased scrutiny of practices at the EU's external borders, potentially deterring unlawful pushbacks, arbitrary detentions, or other violations of refugee and migrant rights. However, the implementation of human rights monitoring will depend on implementation by Member States.

Returns from the EU under the Pact are likely to put additional pressure on Western Balkan countries. Western Balkan countries may also come under increasing pressure to adopt EU measures as outlined in the Pact to align with EU migration policies and reduce irregular crossings into EU territory – which may also result in higher likelihood of pushbacks and violence. Stricter border procedures, including accelerated asylum procedures, rapid returns, and enhanced data-sharing under the EU Pact may lead to an increase in the use of detention in the Western Balkans. Refugees and migrants could face prolonged periods of detention while awaiting decisions on their asylum claims or pending return. Reception capacities may fail to meet basic human rights standards, further exacerbating mental and physical health risks for migrants. Additionally, a

fast-track asylum procedures could erode access to fair legal representation and proper asylum evaluations. This may increase the likelihood of rushed or unfair decisions, and an increased risk of refoulement.⁴⁶

As seen by the evidence put forth in this research, further tougher border measures and anti-smuggling operations and thus harsher transit conditions in the Western Balkans could lead to increased risks and costs associated with smuggling. It may also send a strong signal to smugglers and prospective new arrivals that other routes are easier to cross clandestinely, to avoid the application of border procedures, leading to adaptation of smuggling operations.

44 The border procedure outlined in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum refers to a specific process applied at the external borders of the European Union. The purpose of this procedure is to quickly assess whether asylum seekers who arrive irregularly at the EU's borders are eligible for protection. The procedure involves several key elements: mandatory border screening, expedited asylum processing, detention during the procedure near the border, rapid return procedures.

45 Caritas (2024) [What's wrong with the EU's Pact on Migration](#)

46 Woollard, Catherine (2024) [Editorial: All Pact-Ed up and Ready to Go](#)

“The EU’s migration pact, although it has the potential to influence migration routes and smuggling networks in Albania by promoting stronger border controls and cooperation between member states, may still lead to changes in migrant routes. Smugglers are very careful to redirect migrants from traditional paths, increasing in this way the dependence to bypass the strictest controls. The ability of smugglers to adapt to changes across borders and to find alternative routes remains a challenge for law enforcement agencies and poses risks of exploitation and abuse for migrants seeking to enter or transit through Albania and routes to EU countries.”

Key informant, NGO, Albania

It is not clear how effective the anticipated independent monitoring mechanisms for fundamental rights, to be set up and implemented by EU Member States, will be in detecting violations of migrant and refugee rights and whether the remedies will be sufficient.

As the EU, with increased influence of anti-immigration parties in the European Parliament and some Member States, strengthens its external border management and pressure increases on neighboring regions like the Western Balkans to align with these security-driven approaches, there is a risk that transit countries may adopt similar measures without having adequate safeguards in place. This could lead to an increased focus on security and deterrence (as already observed since 2023), rather than ensuring access to asylum and protection, particularly as anti-immigration sentiments grow both within the EU and in the Western Balkans, further compounding the risk of rights violations for migrants and refugees passing through the region.

Conclusion

Since early 2023 the EU has recently invested heavily in border management and anti-smuggling efforts in the Western Balkans as part of its external migration strategy. These efforts appear to have coincided with a decrease in the official number of refugees and migrants detected transiting through the region in 2023 and early 2024. However, these numbers likely only show part of the picture as smuggling operations seem to have become becoming more covert, forcing refugees and migrants onto more dangerous routes to avoid detection.

What is clear is that despite significant investment in anti-smuggling initiatives the route remains alive and active with smuggling networks continuing to adapt. These adaptations include changes in geographical locations, and modes of operation including the use of technology, to evade detection. As border become more heavily policed, refugees and migrants increasingly rely on smugglers to facilitate their journeys. Key informants report that this increased reliance has led to more instances of exploitation and abuse by smugglers, a trend that was not as commonly reported along this route in the past.

Amid pressure from the EU to curb migration, harsher border management by Western Balkans countries, continues to result in violent pushbacks by state officials and increased use of detention. Refugees and migrants find themselves squeezed between a rock and a hard place, while protection actors face challenges due to reduced funding for protection responses. Key informants broadly agree that the EU’s focus on migration management often overshadows its support for protection needs.

The full impact of this migration landscape is yet to be seen. However, with the upcoming implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, combined with the hard winds signaled by the recent 2024 EU elections⁴⁷, the vulnerability experienced by refugees and migrants is likely to only increase. While stricter measures may reduce smuggling activity in the short term, evidence from recent years – in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Greece especially – suggests that a market for smuggling services will persist.

⁴⁷ Horwood, C. Forin, R. (2024) Op. Cit.



About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform

evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

For more information visit:

<https://mixedmigration.org> and follow us at @Mixed_Migration

About PRAB

The Protecting Rights at Borders (PRAB) initiative is formed by protection and legal aid organisations focusing on human rights compliance at the EU's external and internal borders. The PRAB partners have

well established field presence in the countries of operation enabling direct access to victims of pushbacks, as well as longstanding experience in strategic litigation.