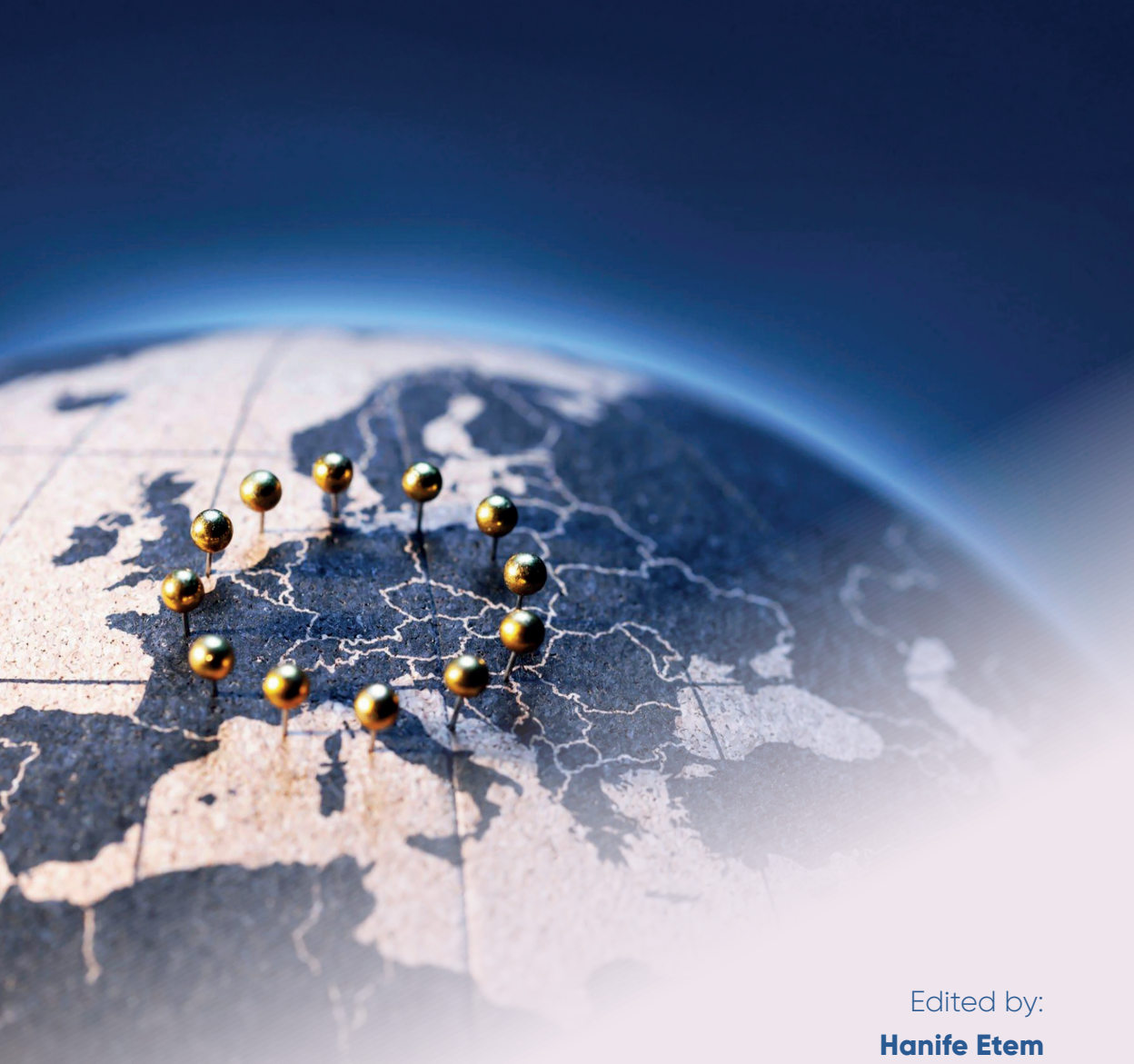

Edited by:
Hanife Etem

7TH INTERNATIONAL BALKAN SUMMER SCHOOL

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN THE BALKANS: EU AND MIGRATION ISSUES PROCEEDINGS

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7TH INTERNATIONAL BALKAN SUMMER SCHOOL

Contemporary Challenges in the Balkans: EU and Migration Issues

Proceedings

Edited by

Hanife Etem

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FOREWORD

The relationship between the European Union and the Western Balkans remains one of the most complex and consequential aspects of the European integration process. The region's journey toward EU membership continues to reveal both the transformative potential and the structural limitations of the European project. Migration, integration, and enlargement are at the heart of this dynamic, shaping not only political and economic developments but also the ways in which identities, institutions, and communities evolve. In this context, Contemporary Challenges in the Balkans: EU and Migration Issues represents an important academic contribution to understanding these multidimensional processes from regional and comparative perspectives.

This volume was developed within the framework of the International Balkan Summer School on Migration and European Integration, an initiative dedicated to fostering academic dialogue, critical reflection, and cross-border collaboration among scholars, practitioners, and young researchers. The book embodies the interdisciplinary and inclusive approach, encouraging a deeper understanding of the region's place in Europe and its role in the region. By bringing together diverse viewpoints, it offers a platform for re-examining the interplay between local realities and supranational ambitions, as well as between historical legacies and contemporary policy challenges.

At a time when Europe is grappling with renewed debates over borders, mobility, and belonging, Balkans provide a distinctive vantage point from which to analyze these issues. The region simultaneously reflects the aspirations of European integration and the tensions that accompany it. Migration flows, socio-economic disparities, and the geopolitics of influence illustrate the ongoing struggle to reconcile national interests with collective European goals. The discussions presented in this book highlight how migration and integration are not merely policy questions but deeply social and cultural processes that shape perceptions of identity, citizenship, and solidarity across Europe.

The academic value of this work lies in its ability to connect empirical observation with conceptual analysis. It demonstrates that the study of migration and EU enlargement requires both a grounded understanding of local contexts and a critical engagement with broader theoretical frameworks. By situating the Balkans within these overlapping perspectives, the volume contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of how integration operates as both a political mechanism and a lived experience.

Ultimately, this collection stands as a testament to intellectual cooperation and academic curiosity. It reflects the shared commitment of emerging scholars to explore the challenges and opportunities that define the European future. Through rigorous analysis and constructive dialogue, the volume seeks to inspire further research and debate on migration, governance, and identity within and beyond the Balkans.

I

MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION IN THE BALKANS

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, CSO's 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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IDENTITY IN TRANSITION: MIGRANT INTEGRATION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN THE EU

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Abstract: Migration has become one of the key socio-political issues of the 21st century, particularly within the European Union (EU), where diverse migration flows challenge existing models of integration and cultural adaptation. This paper explores how migrant identity evolves within the EU, focusing on the dynamic processes of integration and assimilation, as well as the socio-cultural transformations occurring within migrant communities and host societies. The central thesis is that integration is not a linear process but a multidimensional and reciprocal interaction between migrants and their new environments, shaped by policies, public perceptions, and personal experiences.

The paper analyzes key factors influencing migrant identity, including language acquisition, access to the labor market, social networks, and the role of diasporic communities. While some migrants undergo relatively smooth integration due to structured policies and inclusive societal attitudes, others face challenges such as discrimination, cultural alienation, and inconsistent policies across different EU member states. The concept of "cultural hybridity" is particularly relevant, as many migrants navigate between preserving their cultural heritage and embracing new societal norms. This process often results in hybrid cultural expressions that enrich host societies while simultaneously creating new social tensions.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the role of EU policies in the migrant integration process, analyzing frameworks such as the basic principles for immigrant integration and national strategies in different member states. It also examines how the rise of nationalist movements and anti-migration rhetoric impact integration efforts, creating an environment where assimilation is sometimes expected at the expense of cultural diversity. Finally, the paper emphasizes that successful integration requires a balanced approach that values both migrant adaptation and the openness of host societies. By promoting inclusive policies, intercultural dialogue, and addressing socio-economic barriers, the EU can better manage migration challenges and harness its potential for cultural and economic development. These findings contribute to the broader discussion on migration, identity, and social cohesion in Europe.

Keywords: Migrant identity, integration, European Union (EU)

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Introduction

Migration represents one of the most complex and significant socio-political issues shaping the European landscape of the 21st century. Within and in relation to the European Union (EU), migration flows-driven by economic, political, environmental, and social factors-continue to reshape national identities, challenge existing models of integration, and test the boundaries of multicultural coexistence. Although the movement of people is not a new phenomenon, the scale, diversity, and consequences of contemporary migration demand a thorough re-examination of how host societies respond to the arrival of migrants, particularly in the context of integration and cultural adaptation.

This paper explores the interconnection between identity, integration, and the socio-economic inclusion of migrants within the EU, with a particular focus on the dynamics of cultural hybridity, access to the labor market, and institutional support. Migration is viewed not merely as physical relocation, but as a transformative process that shapes both individual identities and collective social structures. Through the analysis of theoretical frameworks, policies, and real-world challenges, this paper aims to highlight the multilayered nature of integration and the need for a balanced and inclusive approach-one that acknowledges the rights and potential of migrants while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion within European communities.

Understanding the migration process

Migration has become one of the key socio-political issues of the 21st century, especially within the European Union (EU), where diverse migration flows challenge existing models of integration and cultural adaptation. The very phenomenon of migration represents "*the act of moving from one spatial unit to another*" (Mesić, 2002: 244). Migration as a phenomenon has been present throughout history, from the beginnings of human existence up to the present day. Due to the complexity of the very concept of migration, as well as the processes accompanying it, a deeper and more serious consideration is necessary. Human societies have constantly changed throughout history, and this dynamic of change continues today. Accordingly, the understanding of migration is also evolving. Numerous factors influence migration flows, and these differ significantly from those that operated a hundred or more years ago. This work analyzes the key factors affecting the identity of migrants, including language acquisition, access to the labor market, social networks, and the role of diaspora communities.

Let us now return to the consideration of the very concept of migration. As early as 1987, Sinha and Ataullah offered a definition that includes the sociological and cultural dimension, according to which migration is understood as "*movement from one place to another, permanent or semi-permanent, leading to cultural diffusion and social integration*" (Mesić, 2002: 247). Migration, in this broader sense, cannot be reduced to a simple act of moving from one geographic location to another. It points to far-reaching processes that involve transformations within social structures. Migration not only changes the composition and dynamics of the society receiving immigrants but also brings changes to the communities from which individuals depart. Emigration leaves its mark on the social, economic, and demographic configuration of the home society. However, it is important to emphasize that contemporary theories offer even more complex approaches to understanding migration, which go beyond traditional concepts and highlight its multilayered nature. Accordingly, we can also refer to the definition of migration by the European Parliament, according to which "*migration is the movement of people from one place to another in order to settle in a new location*" (Europski parlament, 2020). Also, it is important to highlight the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as one of the most recognized organizations dealing with migration issues. IOM defines migration as "*the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border (international migration) or within a state (internal migration), encompassing any movement of people regardless of duration, composition, or causes*" (IOM, n.d.). All of the above definitions share common elements and characteristics that suggest migration is the movement of populations from one place to another. However, migration movement is neither arbitrary nor random – it is always driven by specific causal factors. Within migration processes, especially when it comes to their classification, different forms of migration can be distinguished. One of the most commonly used and universal divisions is the distinction between "*voluntary and involuntary migration (Wrong, 1956), or alternatively, forced and voluntary migration (Du Toit, 1975). Essentially the same division is proposed by George (1970), who differentiates population movements out of necessity or compulsion, where economic incentives remain in the background, and economic migration*" (Mesić, 2002: 250).

Analysis of this classification reveals two fundamental types of migration. The first includes voluntary migrations, which are most often motivated by economic reasons and represent a form of movement consciously chosen by an individual or group in search of better living conditions or personal development. In contrast, forced migrations occur in situations where migrants have no real choice but are compelled to leave a certain area due to armed conflicts, political persecution, natural disasters, or other crisis circumstances.

Regardless of whether the migration is voluntary or forced, both types can be further divided into internal and external migration. Internal migration refers to movement within the borders of the same country, while external migration involves crossing national borders, that is, emigration from the country of origin.

As justification for the IOM definition, the following is also stated in the text:

> *this broad definition encompasses all forms of migration (voluntary/forced migration, internal/international migration, long-term/short-term migration), different motives for migration (migration due to political persecution, conflict, economic problems, environmental degradation, or a combination of these reasons, or migration in search of better economic conditions or conditions for survival or well-being, or other motives such as family reunification), and regardless of the means used for migration (legal/illegal migration). Therefore, it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other reasons, including family reunification* (IOM, n.d.).

A detailed elaboration of the concept of migration further confirms its complexity, both in terms of the different types and the causes that drive them. As previously emphasized, migration does not represent merely the physical movement from one place to another, but also involves a range of deeper social and economic processes.

Causes of Migration

Before deciding to migrate, individuals face certain factors that act as causes or motives for making such a decision. In the case of voluntary migrations, these factors most often include economic and social aspects, such as the search for better employment, higher living standards, or access to better quality services. Systematizing the causes of migration, Bogue classified the factors as push-pull factors. According to Bogue, these factors are:

Push factors:

1. Unfavorable economic situations
2. Unemployment
3. Political or religious discrimination
4. Departure from the value system within a group or community
5. Poor conditions for personal development
6. Natural disasters

Pull factors:

1. Better employment opportunities
2. Higher wages
3. More favorable opportunities for professional advancement and development
4. Overall living conditions
5. Dependence on family members and desires and needs for social belonging
6. Attraction of new and appealing environments" (Mesić, 2002:294).

According to Bogue, migration processes are driven by a range of factors that can be classified into two basic categories: push factors, which refer to unfavorable conditions in the environment people are migrating from, and pull factors, which make the destination attractive to migrants. This theoretical division is especially useful in analyzing voluntary migrations, where individuals, taking existing circumstances into account, make a conscious decision to leave their environment in search of better living conditions.

In contrast, forced migrations are not the result of rational choice but of survival necessity. In such cases, people are compelled to leave their homes to save their lives, often due to armed conflicts, political persecution, or natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and fires. Here, the possibility of free choice is absent, as migration becomes the only option for survival.

The Position of the Migrant Population in Host Societies

Identity and Cultural Hybridization

The question of identity, especially in migration flows, is extremely complex. It is connected to lifelong lifestyles and activities that have shaped an individual's personality, as well as social factors characteristic of the environment in which the individual finds themselves."An individual's identity is three-dimensional; in other words, it has three inseparable components... People are unique individuals, centers of self-awareness; they have different bodies; different life histories; an indelible inner life and a sense of self or subjectivity. This I will call personal identity. Secondly, people are involved in society—they belong to various ethnic, religious, cultural, professional, national, and other groups and are connected with other people in countless formal and informal ways. They define and distinguish themselves and are defined and distinguished by others based on one or

more of these affiliations. This I will call social identity. Thirdly, people belong to—and are aware that they belong to—a particular species, so they define themselves and decide how they should live and behave as human beings*"* (Parekh, 2008: 14). These three dimensions are inseparable from each other and constitute what we call the individual or overall identity.

The complexity of identity becomes evident when different "social identities" intersect, especially in the migration process. When discussing the European Union, it should be noted that the issue of identity is—conditionally speaking—simpler in cases involving migration among European peoples themselves. However, it becomes particularly pronounced when we talk about migration of peoples from outside the "borders" of Europe. The identities of European peoples share similarities that greatly facilitate integration during migration. The mere fact of belonging to the European "family" of peoples is enough to understand this. However, in situations involving migrants from other parts of the world, this represents a special challenge. Differences in cultural and value-related aspects often pose a key challenge to integration itself in Europe.

Stuart Hall distinguishes three significantly different conceptions of identity:

> *I shall distinguish three very different conceptions of identity: those of the (a) Enlightenment subject (b) sociological subject, and (c) post-modern subject (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 275). He emphasizes that these conceptions produce the postmodern subject whose identity is not fixed, essential, or permanent, but fluid and subject to constant shaping and transformation.*
>
> *The subject assumes different identities at different times,identities wich are not unified around a coherent self. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity fiom birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or narrative of the self about ourselves. The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily* (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 277).

Accordingly, identity is subject to change, but it still depends on the individual and how willing they are to embrace new elements, as well as on the environment in which they find themselves. If the environment is not ready to accept the "foreigner" as part of its collective identity, this then poses a significant challenge for the individual. Regardless of their willingness to accept the principles and values of the environment, they are unable to become part of the collective due to rejection by that very collective.

Integration and/or assimilation in migration processes

The migration process primarily aims at permanent settlement in a new area, which often involves entering a completely new cultural and value-based environment and society. The goal of each individual migrant is to adapt and become part of the new society. In this regard, the process of integration into the new social environment is of key importance, with the aim that migrants become equal members of the new society. However, the integration process is not as simple as it may seem. It requires two-way activity, both from the immigrants themselves and from the members of the host society. "It involves a certain way of incorporating newcomers into the prevailing social structure... Advocates of integration rightly insist that immigrants should dedicate themselves to the new society, respect its institutions and values, and demonstrate fundamental loyalty. They are also correct in saying that immigrants should participate in the everyday life of society and create bonds with other members to seriously show their intention to become full members of society." (Parekh, 2008: 75). It is important to emphasize that openness of the host society is also necessary to accept such people and give them a chance to become equal members of society.

We can talk about three dimensions of integration, through which people may, but do not necessarily have to, be accepted and become part of society:

> *(i) the legal-political, (ii) the socio-economic, and (iii) the cultural-religious. As pointed out by Entzinger (2000), these dimensions correspond to the three main factors that interplay with immigration and integration processes: the state, the market, and the nation (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx, 2016: 14).*

The legal-political dimension relates to the issue of residence as well as the political rights and statuses that immigrants may hold. A key question is to what extent immigrants are recognized as full members of the political community. At one end of the spectrum is the irregular immigrant, who is not recognized as a legal-political member of the host society, although they may be integrated in other aspects. At the other end is the immigrant who has acquired or already holds citizenship of the country in which they reside. Between these extremes, there is a wide range of different statuses, which have become even more complex in recent decades due to European states' efforts to regulate migration flows, as well as special legal regimes within the European Union - including distinctions between EU citizens and third-country nationals.

The socio-economic dimension encompasses the social and economic position of people regardless of their citizenship. When analyzing immigrant integration in this context, their access to and inclusion in key aspects of life are examined

- employment, housing, education, and healthcare. The question is whether they have equal access to these resources, whether they use them, and how their outcomes compare with those of the local population with similar qualifications. Since needs in these areas are generally universal and do not depend heavily on cultural background, it is possible to compare the situation of immigrants and the native population. Data on inequalities in outcomes are particularly important as they can serve as a basis for creating appropriate policies.

The cultural-religious dimension deals with how immigrants and the host society perceive and respond to mutual cultural and religious differences. If the host society perceives newcomers as different on these grounds, immigrants may strive to be accepted and recognized in these spheres. However, society may or may not accept this diversity. On one side is the rejection of cultural and religious differences, with the expectation that immigrants fully adapt to the existing monocultural or monoreligious pattern. On the opposite side is the recognition and respect of diverse identities within a pluralistic society. Between these two extremes are numerous compromises, such as acceptance of diversity in private life but limited or selective acceptance in public spaces.

Precisely because of the above, integration cannot be viewed as a one-way process.

> *Again, informed by policy discourses and policy goals, many studies of immigrant integration assume a more or less linear path along which the minority group is supposed to change almost completely while the majority culture is thought to remain the same* (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx, 2016: 12).

That would mean it is a process of assimilation into the new social environment, implying that.. *a society cannot be cohesive and stable unless immigrants assimilate into the prevailing culture and become like everyone else... if some members of society held very different beliefs and values, deep disagreements on essential matters would arise, and a shared life could not be maintained* (Parekh, 2008: 73).

However, the integration process, understood as a self-evident and inevitable process, can lead us in the wrong direction and overlook the fact that '*complex interplay of culturation, identifi cation, social status and concrete interaction patterns of individuals may produce many different "outcomes", much more varied in fact than a more or less linear shift from "immigrant" to "host" ways of doing things*' (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx, 2016: 12). What needs to be emphasized is that integration represents a dynamic process which, as Sinha and Ataullah highlighted when defining migration, changes not only the society from which migrants originate but also the host society. Integration should represent an opportunity to enrich the cultural content of the host society.

The Role of the Labor Market and National Programs in the Integration of the Migrant Population

One of the important factors in integration is immigrants' access to the labor market. However, difficulties in accessing employment are common and can arise from multiple factors, which often overlap and influence each other. Among the most significant are citizenship, legal status, skills and qualifications, as well as language proficiency. Access to the labor market often depends on whether a person is a citizen of a particular country, a member of the EU/EFTA, or comes from a so-called third country.

> *Limits on the right to access national labour markets exist, and they are not necessarily connected with dire economic conditions since they pre-existed the last decade of economic crisis. For example, the Italian Constitution recognises the right to work for citizens only (art. 4), which means that Italian workers have preferential access to the labour market: before applying for the sponsorship of a third country national worker, employers must prove there is no relevant workforce available in the country. The same happens, for example, in Switzerland, where according to the "precedence provision" of the Federal Act on Foreign Nationals, third country workers can be admitted into the Swiss labour market only if no Swiss citizen or foreign national with a long-term residence permit or an EU/EFTA national can be recruited. Also in Finland, law No. 1218/2013 provides for the "availability test" to grant Finnish and EU/EEA citizens priority in entering employment* (Federico & Baglioni, 2021: 5-6).

Different legal statuses among migrants directly affect their right to work. For example, asylum seekers and refugees may have the right to work, but often only after a certain waiting period or additional procedures. Undocumented persons (irregular migrants) usually have no formal right to employment and often rely on "black market" jobs, without labor rights or protection. Temporary workers are another category, typically having limited access to the labor market, often tied to a specific employer or sector, and usually prohibited from changing jobs. Foreign students usually have the right to work a limited number of hours per week, with restrictions varying by country, while permanent residents have significantly broader access to the labor market and often enjoy rights similar to native citizens, although barriers may still exist, especially in public sector jobs or regulated professions. This complexity of legal statuses leads to a multi-layered structure of labor market access, where some migrants enjoy nearly full economic integration while others are almost completely excluded.

Besides formal status, the economic utility of workers plays a crucial role. Many European immigration systems favor highly educated and skilled workers in shortage sectors. Immigrants with in-demand skills often have easier access to employment. Conversely, those with lower qualifications, lacking formal education certificates or holding diplomas not recognized in the host country, face multiple barriers including the need for diploma recognition and additional training. Even highly educated migrants may end up in low-paid or informal jobs due to non-recognition of their qualifications.

Language represents a key obstacle to labor market access. In many occupations, especially those involving client contact, communication, and teamwork, knowledge of the host country's language is essential. Lack of language skills can limit employment opportunities, reduce chances for advancement, or result in jobs below one's qualification level. Many countries offer language courses as part of integration programs, but their effectiveness and availability vary widely.

Integration into the labor market is critically important both for immigrants themselves and for the receiving society.

> *Ensuring that migrants, asylum seekers and refugees can actively participate in the labour market and contribute to the receiving society is key to the well-being, prosperity and cohesion of European societies. Migrant integration is a dynamic process that is shaped both by the changing composition of the migrant flows and by the changes in the receiving country's economy and society. It also requires a series of reforms and new initiatives both in Member States and at the EU level, as well as coordinated measures to be pursued on three fronts* (Gropas, 2021: 75).

A particularly important issue regarding work is the question of domestic work.

> *Broadly speaking, domestic workers provide personal and household care in the frame of a formal or informal employment relationship, which means that they work for one or more households (not their own) for a wage... However, domestic work is defined according to the workplace, which is the private household. Indeed, the defining feature of the work is exclusion from the labour rights and protections seen in other settings (Marchetti, 2022: 1). Policies that prioritize skilled labor, along with xenophobic and gendered discourses present in Europe, place migrant women at a disadvantage in terms of employment.*
>
> *Migrant women are disadvantaged by policies privileging skilled migration as well as by legislation denying work permits to those who have migrated to reunite with their families. At the same time, xenophobic discourses and*

> *gendered representations have developed in European societies, distinguishing between 'good' migrants and those whose integration is deemed impossible on the basis of ideas of the migrants' 'cultural proximity' or 'distance'.The ways in which these racialized and gendered representations inform the organization of domestic and care labour have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Ethnographic studies of domestic service show that, due to the specific nature of care work, 'naturalization' – meaning the normalization of gendered and of racialized difference between people – serves to make the emotional labour and skills of migrant domestic workers invisible, on the basis of the idea of a 'cultural' predisposition for care among women of certain nationalities* (Marchetti, 2022: 34).

The perception of women's cultural predispositions significantly hinders their integration and normalization of life in host societies.

Migration policies

When it comes to the migration policies of the European Union, there is much that could be written. However, in this section, I will focus on policies aimed at workers' rights and the integration process. Regarding the right to work, the following should be highlighted:

> *Furthermore, Article 15(3) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights stipulates that 'Nationals of third countries who are authorised to work in the territories of the Member States are entitled to working conditions equivalent to those of citizens of the Union.' In other words, this right is granted solely to lawfully employed third-country nationals and guarantees 'equivalent' working conditions. The Charter is relevant for the rights of TCNs also in that Article 30 grants 'every worker (…) the right to protection against unjustified dismissal, in accordance with Union law and national laws and practises', and Article 31 grants 'every worker (…) the right to working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity, and to limitation of maximum working hours, to daily and weekly rest periods and to an annual period of paid leave'. Article 31 does not have a restricting reference to Union law and national laws and practises and it explicitly refers to the dignity of the worker (drawing on Article 1 of the Charter which states that 'Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected.')* (Gropas, 2021: 75).

The mentioned articles of the European Union Charter guarantee equal rights to all workers, regardless of whether they are "newcomers" or part of the native population, as long as they have the right to work. However, when we return to the issue of domestic work, it becomes clear that immigrants still face a complex

path to fully realizing their right to work. It is also important not to forget the previously mentioned national programs of Italy and Switzerland, which give absolute priority to nationals and European Union residents.

Regarding the integration and inclusion of the migrant population, the European Commission has adopted the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 as a strategy for the integration and inclusion of immigrants in the member states of the European Union. This plan aims to foster social cohesion and build inclusive societies for all, ensuring equal opportunities and respect for European values for migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background. Also builds upon the 2016 Commission action plan, addressing challenges in employment, education, and social inclusion, and acknowledging the key role migrants play in the European economy and society, especially highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis. The plan focuses on different stages of integration, from pre-departure to long-term inclusion, and promotes a two-way process where migrants are offered help to integrate and they in turn make an active effort to become integrated. The plan emphasizes inclusion for all, targeted support where needed, and mainstreaming gender and anti-discrimination priorities to ensure that all policies are accessible and beneficial for everyone, including migrants. It promotes an integrated approach to migrants' inclusion, aligning with EU strategies to foster equality and social cohesion, and aims to build trust between communities and prevent extremist ideologies. The action plan considers the combination of personal characteristics that can represent specific challenges for migrants, taking into account gender, race, religion, sexual orientation and disability. The plan outlines actions in education and training, aiming to increase participation of migrant children in early childhood education, equip teachers with skills to manage diverse classrooms, and improve recognition of qualifications acquired in non-EU countries. In employment and skills, the plan aims to strengthen cooperation between labor market actors, support migrant entrepreneurs, increase labor market participation of migrant women, and facilitate skills assessment and validation. Actions in health focus on ensuring equal access to healthcare services, including mental health, for migrants and EU citizens with a migrant background, and addressing specific challenges faced by migrant women. Addressing housing, the plan seeks to promote access to adequate and affordable housing, including social housing, fight discrimination in the housing market, and promote innovative housing solutions. The plan aims to build strong partnerships by empowering stakeholders to contribute to the integration process and building multi-stakeholder partnerships at various levels. Increased opportunities for EU funding are planned under the 2021-2027

Multi-annual Financial Framework to support integration and inclusion. The action plan aims to foster participation and encounters with the host society to develop welcoming, diverse, and inclusive societies. Enhance the use of new technologies and digital tools for integration and inclusion, ensuring that newly developed digital integration services are assessed for accessibility, inclusiveness and quality. The action plan aims to facilitate monitoring progress towards an evidence-based integration and inclusion policy, supporting national authorities and other stakeholders to monitor integration outcomes and to ensure an evidence-based debate in the field of integration.[1]

This action plan means that the EU is committed to creating inclusive, cohesive societies where migrants and citizens with a migrant background can fully participate, thrive, and contribute - ensuring equal opportunities, respect for human rights, and Social harmony across Europe.

Conclusion

The process of migration to and within the European Union is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Integration goes beyond the mere inclusion of migrants in the labor market; it encompasses a broad range of social, cultural, political, and psychological factors that influence how migrants adapt and become accepted members of the host society. Successful integration requires a multidimensional approach that considers migrants' legal status, access to employment, education, healthcare, and more, as well as their ability to preserve and negotiate their cultural and religious identities within a pluralistic society. Integration is, by its nature, a dynamic and bidirectional process, involving both the efforts of migrants to adapt and the readiness of the host society to embrace diversity. This perspective rejects linear models of integration, recognizing instead that cultural identities are fluid and subject to ongoing transformation, shaped by personal experiences, societal attitudes, and legal frameworks. Acknowledging cultural hybridity and intercultural dialogue as key components of integration helps create an environment in which diversity is seen as an asset rather than a threat.

Moreover, the intersection of racial, gender, and cultural representations further complicates this process, particularly in the case of migrant women employed in domestic and care sectors, who often face additional vulnerabilities due to xenophobic and gendered narratives that reduce their visibility and undermine their rights. Addressing these disparities requires targeted policies that

1 See full text https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758

promote gender equality, combat discrimination, and recognize the invaluable contributions of migrant women workers. The multiple dimensions of integration—legal-political, socio-economic, and cultural-religious—must be addressed holistically. Policies should ensure equal access to rights and social resources, promote intercultural understanding, and create opportunities for genuine participation in public life. Recognizing the richness migrants bring to the cultural fabric of Europe, integration should be seen as an opportunity to enhance social diversity, strengthen cohesion, and build resilient communities.

In conclusion, an effective migration policy in the EU must prioritize inclusiveness, flexibility, and ongoing dialogue, ensuring that migrants are not only seen as recipients of support but as active contributors to the social, cultural, and economic life of European societies. Such an approach will ultimately lead to a shared future based on mutual respect, understanding, and collective prosperity—transforming the challenges of migration into opportunities for shared growth and enrichment.

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MIGRATION FROM BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA TO CZECHIA AFTER 2004: SOFT POWER, INTEGRATION AND RETENTION

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Abstract: Since the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004, migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina has formed a small but distinctive element of Czechia's increasingly diverse migration landscape. This article explores the evolution, integration, and retention of Bosnian migrants within the broader framework of Czech migration governance, focusing on how institutional credibility and societal openness contribute to migrant attraction and long-term settlement. Although numerically modest, the Bosnian community represents an important case for understanding how smaller post-Yugoslav diasporas adapt within the context of a rapidly transforming Central European state. The analysis situates Bosnian migration within the national shift that turned Czechia from a country of emigration into one of immigration and examines the mechanisms that sustain this transition. Methodologically, the article relies on secondary sources and policy analysis rather than primary fieldwork. It synthesizes statistical data from the Czech Statistical Office and official reports issued by the Ministry of the Interior, as well as findings from relevant non-governmental organizations. This interpretative approach provides a comprehensive overview of institutional and societal dynamics, while acknowledging the limitations of secondary-data research. The analytical framework draws on Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power (1990, 2004) to explain how legal frameworks, integration centers, and civil-society actors function as indirect instruments of non-coercive influence in migration governance. Comparative references to Austria, Germany, and Slovenia highlight the differing strategies of integration and retention across Central Europe, showing how Czechia's understated, institution-based approach has produced stable yet often invisible outcomes for smaller migrant groups. The article argues that while the Czech model demonstrates considerable inclusiveness and administrative reliability, the absence of targeted retention measures limits its long-term sustainability. Strengthening data collection, community representation, and retention-oriented initiatives could enhance Czechia's position as a regional model of equitable and durable migration governance.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, migration, soft power, European Union, Czechia

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Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has experienced continuous emigration, driven by a combination of postwar reconstruction challenges, economic stagnation, and demographic decline (Halilovich et al., 2018). The Czech Republic, particularly after its accession to the European Union in 2004, has emerged as one of several Central European destinations attracting migrants from the Western Balkans in search of stability and employment opportunities. Although the Bosnian community in Czechia remains relatively small, it represents an important case for understanding post-2004 regional mobility and the evolving integration frameworks within Central and Eastern Europe.

According to the *Report on the Situation in the Area of Migration and Integration of Foreigners in the Czech Republic* (Ministry of the Interior, 2025a), the number of foreign nationals legally residing in Czechia reached 1,094,089 in 2024, accounting for approximately 10 percent of the total population. Most foreign residents originate from Ukraine, Slovakia, and Vietnam, while 2,249 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina held residence permits in Czechia according to the latest nationality-disaggregated data published by the Ministry of the Interior (2025b: 5). Although their share of the total foreign population is small, the community's persistence reflects long-term labor migration rather than short-term mobility. According to the Czech Ministry of the Interior, employment remains one of the main reasons for residence among foreign nationals in Czechia, particularly those from third countries, alongside family reunification and education (Ministry of the Interior, 2025a).

Migration from BiH to Czechia should be understood as part of a broader transformation of Czech migration governance. Since joining the EU, Czechia has transitioned from being a country of emigration to a country of immigration (Drbohlav, 2011). This change has been accompanied by the gradual development of institutional structures designed to manage integration, such as the Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners (CPIC), established in 2009 and now operating in all fourteen regions. These centers provide Czech-language courses, legal advice, and employment support (Ministry of the Interior, 2025c).

This article examines the migration process from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Czechia through three interconnected perspectives. First, it analyzes statistical data and demographic trends to outline the scale and characteristics of Bosnian migration since 2004. Second, it explores the institutional and societal framework supporting the integration of Bosnian migrants, focusing on the roles of public institutions and non-governmental organizations. It applies the concept of soft power, as developed by Joseph S. Nye (2004), to assess how Czechia's legal, social,

and cultural mechanisms function as non-coercive instruments for attracting and retaining migrants. This approach addresses a gap in the literature, as the concept of soft power has rarely been applied to the study of migration governance and integration policies in Central Europe. By linking migration analysis with the notion of soft power, the article offers a new interpretative framework for understanding how institutional credibility and social openness influence migrant retention.

Methodologically, this study is based exclusively on secondary sources, including statistical data from the Czech Statistical Office and policy reports issued by the Czech Ministry of the Interior and non-governmental organizations. It does not employ primary empirical methods such as interviews or surveys. The analysis is therefore interpretative in nature, aiming to synthesize and contextualize existing data rather than to generate new empirical evidence. This approach allows for a comprehensive overview of institutional and societal dynamics while acknowledging the limitations inherent in secondary-data analysis.

By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to demonstrate that Czechia's experience with Bosnian migration provides a useful example of how small migrant communities adapt within a medium-sized EU member state with a rapidly evolving migration regime. It also argues that the Czech case highlights the potential and limitations of soft-power-based integration strategies in fostering long-term retention and social cohesion.

Empirical and Institutional Analysis

The trajectory of migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Czechia since 2004 must be understood within the broader regional mobility patterns and the structural transformation of Czech migration governance. The Czech Republic's accession to the European Union in May 2004 fundamentally reshaped its migration policy framework. Harmonization with EU legislation opened new legal pathways for third-country nationals, including citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to live and work in the country. At the same time, rapid economic growth and labor shortages across multiple sectors—particularly manufacturing, construction, logistics, and services—created sustained demand for foreign workers (OECD, 2022).

According to the Czech Statistical Office (2024a), the total number of foreign nationals legally residing in Czechia increased from approximately 254,000 in 2004 to more than 1,063,000 at the end of 2023—a fourfold increase over two decades. Within this expansion, migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina represent a small but consistent share. Although more recent nationality-specific figures are not

yet publicly available, the size of the Bosnian community appears relatively stable, showing neither substantial growth nor decline.

Foreign nationals have become a structural component of the Czech economy. In 2023, 942,328 foreign nationals were economically active, representing 18.6 percent of total employment (Czech Statistical Office, 2024b). Employment among foreigners remains concentrated primarily in industrial and service sectors, especially in manufacturing and construction, where demand for manual and technical labor continues to exceed domestic supply. Migrants from non-EU countries, including those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, are predominantly employed in manufacturing, construction, and related industrial fields, where long-term labor shortages persist (Ministry of the Interior, 2025a).

The volume of international migration remained high in 2024. A total of 121,800 people immigrated to Czechia, while 85,000 people ended their residence in the country. As a result, net migration added 36,800 inhabitants, of whom 17,000 were Ukrainian citizens and 4,700 were Slovak citizens. In addition, 291,000 residents changed their municipality of residence within Czechia in 2024. These figures confirm the continuing stability of Czech migration trends and underscore the country's attractiveness as a labor and settlement destination within Central Europe (Czech Statistical Office, 2025).

Regional distribution patterns reveal that most foreign nationals reside in major urban centers—particularly Prague and Brno—followed by Ostrava, Plzeň, and Hradec Králové. This concentration corresponds to the geography of economic opportunity and the availability of integration services. Larger cities also host most non-governmental organizations and Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners (Centra na podporu integrace cizinců, CPIC), which provide language training, legal counseling, and cultural orientation. Smaller municipalities, by contrast, often lack the institutional capacity to offer such services on a consistent basis (Ministry of the Interior, 2025c).

Despite its relative stability and positive integration outcomes, the Bosnian migrant community in Czechia is often underrepresented in annual reports and policy evaluations of organizations working with migrants and refugees. This reflects both its small numerical presence and the tendency of institutional monitoring to focus on larger or more vulnerable groups. Cultural and linguistic proximity between Bosnians and Czechs facilitates adaptation and reduces integration barriers compared with migrants from more distant cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the absence of organized Bosnian community structures and low political representation means that this group remains underrepresented in policy debates on migration and integration.

The institutional architecture of migrant integration in Czechia has evolved considerably since 2004. The Ministry of the Interior serves as the central coordinating authority, responsible for developing and implementing the national Integration of Foreigners Policy Framework. A cornerstone of this framework is the network of Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners (Centra na podporu integrace cizinců, CPIC), established in 2009 and operated by the Refugee Facilities Administration (Správa uprchlických zařízení, SUZ). The centers, co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), operate in all 14 regions and provide Czech-language courses, legal and social counseling, employment assistance, and cultural orientation (Ministry of the Interior, 2025c).

The CPIC network represents a key institutional embodiment of Czechia's soft-power approach to migration governance. By providing accessible public services and opportunities for civic participation, it fosters inclusion and institutional trust that indirectly encourage long-term settlement. According to the Refugee Facilities Administration's Annual Report 2023, CPIC centers served more than 25,000 unique clients and delivered approximately 145,000 individual services nationwide (Refugee Facilities Administration, 2024, p. 18). Although nationality-disaggregated data are not available, Bosnian migrants are among the beneficiaries, particularly in Prague, the South Moravian Region, and the Moravian-Silesian Region, where Western Balkan migrants are most numerous. For smaller groups such as Bosnians, CPIC centers often represent the only formal institutional platform available for social support and integration.

Beyond state-managed centers, Czech civil society plays a vital complementary role. The Organization for Aid to Refugees (Organizace pro pomoc uprchlíkům, OPU), founded in 1991, provides legal, social, and humanitarian aid to migrants and asylum seekers through its offices in Prague, Brno, Ostrava, and Hradec Králové. Its 2024 annual report recorded more than 7,000 clients of various nationalities (Organization for Aid to Refugees, 2025). Another significant actor is People in Need (Člověk v tísni), whose Migration Program focuses on improving public understanding of migration and integration in Czechia. The program provides balanced information on migration through media and educational activities, conducts policy analyses, and promotes evidence-based dialogue between journalists, educators, and policymakers. Its work aims to counter stereotypes and foster more informed and inclusive public discourse on migration (People in Need, n.d.).

At the coordination level, the Consortium of NGOs Working with Migrants—founded in 2003 and comprising 18 member organizations—serves as an umbrella platform for advocacy and knowledge exchange (Consortium of NGOs Working with Migrants, n.d.). This network facilitates communication between government

institutions and civil-society actors, ensuring that migrants' needs are reflected in policy debates. The combination of state-led integration centers and grassroots initiatives embodies the dual character of the Czech model: a balance between formal institutional mechanisms and decentralized, bottom-up soft power.

While this institutional structure demonstrates a high degree of inclusiveness and administrative capacity, it also faces significant challenges. Funding for integration programs depends heavily on EU financial cycles, creating periods of uncertainty and project fragmentation. Moreover, the lack of nationality-specific monitoring limits the assessment of policy effectiveness for smaller migrant groups. Although Bosnian migrants benefit from general integration measures, their small numbers mean they rarely attract targeted policy attention. This gap illustrates a broader issue in Central European migration governance: maintaining universal access while addressing the distinct needs of smaller, well-integrated communities.

In the absence of direct quantitative indicators, the integration and retention of Bosnian migrants must be evaluated through broader system-level trends. The number of third-country nationals with permanent residence exceeded 348,592 in 2023 (Czech Statistical Office, 2024b). The rising share of long-term residents indicates successful transitions from temporary to permanent status, suggesting both economic stability and social integration. The OECD (2022) recommends that Czechia better utilize the potential of skilled migrants by simplifying the recognition of foreign qualifications and linking integration services more closely with labor-market participation—recommendations particularly relevant for Bosnian nationals, whose qualifications and linguistic familiarity support socio-economic inclusion.

Comparative and Cultural Integration Analysis

Understanding the integration of Bosnian migrants in Czechia requires situating their experience within broader European migration patterns from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The wars of the 1990s displaced more than two million people, leading to the formation of large Bosnian diasporas in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Sweden. Over time, these refugee communities evolved into stable, long-term migrant populations, with second and third generations achieving high levels of social and economic integration (Valenta & Ramet, 2011). Czechia played only a marginal role during the initial wave of forced migration due to its limited asylum capacity and relatively restrictive migration policy in the 1990s. However, since the early 2000s—particularly following its accession to the European Union in 2004—it has emerged as a subsequent destination for labor migrants from the Western Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Austria and Germany have historically functioned as the principal destinations for Bosnian migrants, owing to their geographic proximity, stronger economies, and early humanitarian admission policies. During the 1990s, both countries admitted large numbers of Bosnian refugees under temporary protection schemes introduced during the Bosnian War (1992–1995), many of whom later regularized their status and settled permanently. As of 2021, Germany hosted approximately 385,000 Bosnian nationals and Austria around 176,000 (OECD, 2024). Both states have since developed comprehensive integration systems combining structured language education, vocational training, and targeted employment programs. These initiatives have contributed to high rates of labor-market participation, permanent residence, and citizenship among Bosnian migrants (OECD, 2022).

Slovenia provides another significant point of comparison. As a successor state of former Yugoslavia, it maintains strong linguistic, cultural, and familial ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the *Mapping the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Diaspora* report, approximately 150,000 people of Bosnian origin live in Slovenia, including both first-generation migrants and their descendants, many of whom hold Slovenian citizenship (Halilovich et al., 2018). Migration from BiH to Slovenia accelerated after 1991, primarily for economic reasons, and Bosnians now represent the largest foreign-born group in the country. Their integration benefits from shared language, familiarity with administrative systems, and long-standing social networks (Klopčič, 2020). Public attitudes toward migrants in Slovenia remain ambivalent, with a large share of the majority population expressing concerns about immigration in general. However, direct contact and long-term coexistence contribute to relatively positive perceptions of Bosnians, who are among the most established and socially integrated immigrant groups (Medvešek, Bešter & Pirc, 2024).

Compared to these established destinations, Czechia constitutes a smaller and more recent destination for Bosnian migration. Most Bosnian nationals who arrived after 2004 did so primarily for employment rather than for international protection purposes. Consequently, their integration follows a labor-market rather than a refugee trajectory. The absence of a large-scale refugee influx explains both the small size of the Bosnian community and its limited institutional visibility. There are no large diaspora associations comparable to those in Austria or Slovenia, and the public visibility of Bosnian migrants in Czechia remains limited.

Despite its smaller scale, Czechia shares certain institutional similarities with its regional counterparts. Its integration policy is guided by principles of equal access to education, social services, and labor rights. The network of Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners (CPIC), operating in all fourteen regions,

provides services parallel to integration programs in Austria and Germany, albeit on a smaller scale. What distinguishes the Czech model is its universal design: all third-country nationals, regardless of nationality, have equal access to support services. From a soft-power perspective, Austria and Germany pursue explicit attraction strategies aimed at retaining skilled migrants, while Slovenia relies primarily on cultural and linguistic proximity to foster inclusion. Czechia's model lies between these approaches. Although it does not frame integration as an explicit instrument of attraction, its economic stability, public safety, and predictable administration function as de facto soft-power assets that encourage migrants to remain (Drbohlav, 2011).

Cultural integration among Bosnian migrants in Czechia is shaped by language acquisition, education, and everyday interaction. Both Czech and Bosnian belong to the group of Slavic languages, which facilitates learning of Czech and supports smoother adaptation. Many Bosnian migrants are already familiar with Central European cultural norms, which further eases adjustment. Second-generation migrants integrate especially well through the education system. Children of Bosnian origin attend Czech schools alongside their native peers, benefiting from an education system that acknowledges the presence of pupils with different mother tongues and actively supports them through inclusive measures and integration policies promoted by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, 2025). Non-governmental organizations and CPIC centers complement formal schooling through tutoring, intercultural workshops, and parental counseling, fostering long-term socialization within Czech institutions.

The workplace plays a central role in the integration process. Like other migrants from the Western Balkans, Bosnians in Czechia tend to achieve high employment rates, which provide frequent opportunities for interaction with Czech colleagues and institutions. Integration in the workplace is further supported by non-governmental organizations that assist migrants with legal counseling, language training, and protection against exploitative employment practices. According to People in Need's Annual 2024 Report (2025), these initiatives aim to promote fair working conditions and equal access to employment for all migrants in Czechia, emphasizing prevention and long-term inclusion rather than crisis intervention.

Early experiences of Bosnian refugees further illustrate this environment of pragmatic solidarity. As Bosnian refugee Hadis Medenčević, who arrived in Prague in 1992, recalls, "the Czech Republic received us in a very humane way… We were allowed to study and later to work," even though the state initially "had

no developed legislation" for such cases (Slovo 21, 2022: 6–7). His testimony underscores the role of human dignity and individual effort in the successful integration of Bosnians within Czech society.

At the same time, transnational connections remain central to the Bosnian migrant experience. Regular travel, remittances, and communication with relatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina sustain strong cross-border networks. Many Bosnian families engage in circular migration, moving seasonally or periodically between the two countries depending on employment opportunities and family circumstances. These practices reflect what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) describe as *transnational social fields*—spaces of overlapping social, cultural, and economic relations that link migrants simultaneously to their country of origin and destination. For many Bosnians in Czechia, this dual orientation provides psychological stability and allows them to maintain cultural continuity while adapting to new surroundings.

In comparative perspective, Bosnian migrants in Czechia demonstrate strong labor-market integration but limited organizational and political visibility. In Austria and Slovenia, well-developed community associations enable Bosnians to maintain their language and culture while gaining representation in public life. In contrast, integration in Czechia occurs primarily at the individual and institutional levels, with less emphasis on collective organization. From a soft-power perspective, this limits the symbolic recognition of Bosnians as part of Czech multiculturalism, even though their practical integration outcomes remain positive. The decentralized nature of Czech integration policy promotes successful, low-conflict incorporation but does not foster the same degree of community identity observed in larger diaspora contexts.

This comparison highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of Czechia's approach. The absence of politicization and the professional administration of integration services create a welcoming environment that fosters retention through everyday inclusion rather than formal strategy. At the same time, the lack of targeted initiatives for smaller communities limits opportunities for cultural expression and public representation. The second generation of Bosnian migrants exemplifies the potential of this system — linguistically and socially integrated, increasingly mobile within education and employment, yet maintaining transnational ties to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Integration in this context represents neither full assimilation nor mere coexistence but a dynamic balance between cultural continuity and pragmatic adaptation.

Overall, Czechia's experience illustrates a model of "quiet integration," in which soft power operates not through explicit campaigns or national strategies but

through consistent governance, accessible public services, and social trust. Compared to the long-established diasporas in Austria and Slovenia, the Bosnian community in Czechia is smaller and less visible, yet its integration outcomes are remarkably stable. The absence of social conflict, combined with steady employment and linguistic proximity, has produced a form of integration that is efficient, understated, and durable, demonstrating how implicit soft power can effectively shape migration outcomes in Central Europe.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The integration of migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina into Czech society offers a revealing example of how a Central European state employs institutional and societal mechanisms that function as instruments of soft power. Over the past two decades, Czechia has transitioned from a country of emigration to an important destination for foreign workers, driven by economic growth, demographic change, and persistent labor shortages (OECD, 2022). Within this transformation, the Bosnian community—though numerically modest—illustrates a model of successful, low-conflict integration grounded in predictability and institutional inclusiveness.

Furthermore, data from the Ministry of the Interior indicate a continuous increase in the number of foreign residents since 2004—from approximately 254,000 to more than one million by mid-2025. Foreign nationals account for nearly one-fifth of total employment in the Czech economy, highlighting their structural role in maintaining national productivity. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, numbering 2,249 as of June 2025, represent a small but economically active and socially cohesive community (Ministry of the Interior, 2025b). Their integration trajectory highlights the interplay between legal stability, economic opportunity, and cultural proximity, which together facilitate mutual adaptation between migrants and the host population.

Czechia's integration infrastructure—anchored in the national network of Centers for Support of Integration of Foreigners (CPIC) and supported by a dense civil-society ecosystem—embodies a sophisticated form of institutional soft power. These organizations, ranging from state-funded centers to NGOs such as the Organization for Aid to Refugees, People in Need, and the Consortium of NGOs Working with Migrants, provide migrants with essential services including language instruction, legal counseling, social integration assistance, and civic education. While not explicitly designed as a retention strategy, these mechanisms produce tangible soft-power effects. By expanding access to information, rights, and opportunities, they build trust in Czech institutions and foster a durable

sense of belonging. For many migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, these conditions play a decisive role in their decision to remain long-term.

The Czech approach contrasts with the more explicit soft-power strategies employed in Western Europe. Countries such as Austria and Germany implement structured recruitment and retention programs to attract skilled migrants, often framed in terms of demographic sustainability and global competitiveness (OECD, 2022). Slovenia, drawing on its Yugoslav legacy, relies on cultural and linguistic affinity as a driver of inclusion (Medvešek, Bešter, & Pirc, 2024). Czechia occupies an intermediate position. Its soft power is implicit rather than declarative: its attractiveness derives not from overt messaging but from institutional reliability, accessible governance, and the fact that migration from the Western Balkans has not been politicized in Czech public discourse. This understated model avoids social polarization and fosters pragmatic integration, yet its subtlety also limits engagement with specific migrant communities and recognition of their symbolic contributions.

The Bosnian experience in Czechia exemplifies this duality. On one hand, Bosnian migrants integrate effectively at both economic and social levels: they are employed, socially stable, and linguistically adaptable, with few instances of tension or conflict. On the other hand, the lack of nationality-specific monitoring and limited community representation render their achievements largely invisible. Without systematic data on variables such as employment sectors, residence transitions, or civic participation, policymakers lack the tools to evaluate existing measures or to design targeted interventions. The relative invisibility of small, well-integrated groups such as Bosnians therefore reflects both a policy success—in terms of social harmony—and a limitation, in terms of recognition and institutional learning. Addressing this gap would require more granular data collection and stronger mechanisms for community engagement.

Conceptually, Czechia's migration governance illustrates how soft power can operate within domestic institutional frameworks. Nye's (1990, 2004) concept of attraction rather than coercion manifests here not through foreign policy projection but through the everyday functioning of inclusive institutions. Soft power in this context is relational: it emerges from trust, access, and legitimacy built through consistent interaction between migrants and the host state. Integration centers and NGOs, through reliable service delivery, act as channels of attraction that cultivate Czechia's reputation as a predictable and humane destination. The strength of this model lies in its normalization of diversity—migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina are not framed as outsiders to be managed but as active participants in Czechia's social and economic development.

Nonetheless, several policy challenges remain. First, the lack of nationality-disaggregated data constrains both research and policy evaluation. Expanding the statistical frameworks of the Czech Statistical Office and the Ministry of the Interior to include smaller national groups would enable evidence-based policymaking and targeted program design. Second, while the universal design of Czech integration policy ensures equality of access, it also limits the visibility of smaller migrant communities. Developing targeted outreach mechanisms—such as regional liaison programs or diaspora partnerships—could strengthen communication between institutions and underrepresented groups. Austria's community liaison model (OECD, 2022) and Slovenia's municipal cultural associations demonstrate the potential of such initiatives to enhance inclusion without undermining universality (Medvešek, Bešter, & Pirc, 2024).

In addition, labor-market integration could be deepened through better recognition of foreign qualifications and vocational credentials. Many Bosnian migrants possess skilled trades or tertiary education degrees that are underutilized due to bureaucratic obstacles. Simplifying credential recognition and expanding bridging programs would improve migrants' access to higher-value employment and alleviate labor shortages (OECD, 2022). Furthermore, promoting civic and cultural participation through local initiatives, intercultural centers, and small grants could provide migrants with opportunities to engage more fully in Czech public life. Municipal involvement in such projects would also strengthen social cohesion at the community level.

Finally, Czechia could embed the principle of retention more explicitly within its migration policy. While current frameworks emphasize admission and integration, long-term retention is a key component of sustainable migration governance. Framing retention within a soft-power paradigm—grounded in trust, opportunity, and inclusion—would enable policymakers to design coherent strategies that benefit both migrants and the host society. It would also reinforce Czechia's position as a constructive actor within the EU–Western Balkans corridor, contributing to regional stability through managed mobility and circular migration partnerships (IOM, 2021).

In sum, the experience of Bosnian migrants in Czechia demonstrates the effectiveness of quiet, institution-based soft power. The Czech model achieves integration and long-term retention not through public campaigns or overt rhetoric but through accessible institutions, capable civil society, and consistent economic opportunity. Its strengths lie in inclusivity, stability, and administrative predictability, while its limitations concern data scarcity and the invisibility of small communities. Addressing these challenges would enhance governance capacity

and further strengthen Czechia's credibility as a fair and attractive destination for migrants from the Western Balkans and beyond. In an era of increasing polarization around migration in Europe, the Czech experience stands as a model of modest, consistent, and human-centered governance that sustains both economic vitality and social cohesion.

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF MOREA IMMIGRANTS: EXAMPLES OF ANTALYA AND KUŞADASI

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Abstract: During and after the 1821 Mora Rebellion, the Mora Turks who managed to hold on to life migrated to regions where they could be safe and rebuild their lives. The migration locations were the capital city of Istanbul, the coastal cities of Western Anatolia, Kuşadası, Antalya, etc. The Mora Turks, who also gained a migrant identity with this journey, entered a process of adaptation with both the local people and other migrant groups in the regions where they settled. However, this process did not progress at the same pace in every region. This study aims to compare the integration processes of the Mora Turks who migrated to the Ottoman lands after the 1821 Mora Rebellion in Antalya and Kuşadası. Through both examples, it will be revealed that the migration movement had transformative effects not only on spatial but also on social, cultural and economic structures. In doing so, various archive records, travel books and research works will be used.

Keywords: Ottoman, Balkans, Morea, Antalya, Kuşadası, forced migration, integration

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Introduction

Migration is the process of people moving away from their current lands, their accustomed social structures, existing economic opportunities, and in short, many elements of social life, and opening doors to new living spaces (Yalçın, 2004: 5). Migration, which should not be defined as a mere displacement movement, is a dynamic process that shapes the demographic, cultural, socioeconomic structure of societies and their development (Akıncı vd., 2015: 61). This process brings about the formation of new relationships and interactions, and the reshaping of the existing structure. (Dağaşan & Aydın, 2017: 740).

The migrations that occurred as a result of the great land losses experienced in the Balkan region in the last period of the Ottoman Empire were one of the most important issues of the 19th century. The migrations that occurred individually or collectively during this period brought about important developments in social, economic and cultural terms. Another migration event that occurred from the Balkan region was the migration to Morea. This process, which started with the 1821 Morea Rebellion, resulted in the massacre of thousands of people and the displacement of thousands of people from their homes. In this sense, it is seen that Morea immigrants migrated to the capital Istanbul, the coastal cities of Western Anatolia, some Aegean Islands and the Antalya district in order to establish a new life during and after the rebellion (Örenç, 2020: 69). The immigrants had difficulties in terms of food, shelter, adaptation, etc. in the regions where they settled. As a result, the state and the local people tried to eliminate these difficulties with the support they provided to the Morea immigrants.

The process of integration of the immigrants to the region where they are settled is at least as important as the rebellion process and the migration event. At this point, communication and interaction between groups have an important place. Migration is not only a geographical movement, but also a dynamism and a combination of differences (Kaya, 2015: 5). Although it can create areas of conflict, competition and sharing, it also creates the energy and synergy that will enable the solutions of the tensions that arise. Ultimately, it emerges as a result of the change and transformation of the social structure (Balcıoğlu, 2007: 46-47).

The integration processes experienced in the regions to which they migrated affect both the new lives of the immigrants and the social, cultural, political, etc. aspects of the region. In this respect, it is an issue that needs to be evaluated how fast the integration between the regions progresses and what kind of effects this process has on the region. In this study, Kuşadası and Antalya districts, where the Mora immigrants migrated, were selected as sample settlement

areas. Because Kuşadası is a district of İzmir Sanjak, Aydın Province, and is one of the areas in the region where the immigrants first entered and mostly migrated. Antalya is the central district of Teke Sanjak, Konya Province, and is far from the hometowns where the immigrants left. It is also located in a region where a small number of immigrants migrated. A comparative study will be attempted while addressing the integration process in these settlement areas located in different regions. In doing so, archival records, travel books and research works will be utilized.

The Mora Rebellion of 1821 and Forced Migration

The French Revolution, which took place in Europe under the influence of the period called the "Age of Enlightenment" in the 18th century, led to the emergence of nationalism and libertarian movements (Sezer, 1999: 87). This idea of nationalism that emerged after the French Revolution also manifested itself in the Balkans, which were within the Ottoman geography, after Europe. Because the multinational Balkan peoples were influenced by this idea and began to take action (Taştan, 2006: 433). The following statements of Theodoros Kolokotronis, who was among the leaders of the 1821 Mora Rebellion, in his Apomnimonevmata (Memoirs) explain the effects of the French Revolution:

> *In my opinion, the French Revolution and Napoleon opened the eyes of the world. Before that, nations did not know themselves and people thought that kings were gods on earth and said that everything they did was good. Therefore, it is more difficult to govern a people today.* (Mazower, 2021: 36).

One of the peoples most affected by the idea of nationalism was the Greeks. In the early 19th century, the Greeks, who were spread all over the Ottoman Empire, lived mostly in the Aegean and Mediterranean islands, Mora, Thessaly and Rumelia (Çelik, 2013: 183). The Greeks, who always had a privileged position within the Ottoman Empire, were given the right to property on land as well as freedom of language and religion (Karal, 1970: 107). In this context, Arnold Toynbee said, " *The Greeks were like partners of the Ottoman Empire."* (Toynbee, 1999: 40).

The Greeks, who were in a privileged position within the state, despite all these conditions, especially with the instigation of Russia, were firmly attached to the idea of establishing an independent state. In line with this purpose, the Filiki Eterya Society was established in 1814 (Cevdet, 1966: 93). The number of members of this society, which was in the most important position of preparing the Greek rebellion, reached 200,000 by 1821 and the activities of the society matured the idea of independence (Toprak, 2019: 139). Finally, on April 2, 1821 (

March 21 according to the ancient Greek calendar), they started the rebellion under the leadership of Bishop Germanos of Balyabadra with the slogan " *Peace to Christians! Respect to the Councils! Death to the Turks!"* (Howarth, 1976:28).

The rebellion that started in Kalavrita Castle under the leadership of Bishop Germanos of Balyabadra quickly spread to the Morea and the islands (Örenç, 2020: 33). The rebellious Greeks committed massacres that will not be erased from the pages of history in all the cities they entered. In the environment created by the 1821 Morea Rebellion, there was no longer a safe life for the Morea Turks who suffered a lot and were subjected to massacres. In this sense, the rebellion process was the beginning of a period full of deep pain for the Turks living in the Morea Peninsula. Because, at the very beginning of the rebellion, the rebels attacked these people mercilessly with the slogans " *No Turks will remain; neither in the Morea nor in the World* " (Phillips, 1897: 48), did not recognize the right to life and forced them to choose between death and migration. W. Alison Phillips, who wrote the history of the Mora rebellion, stated that the song that was circulated from mouth to mouth, " *Let there be no Turks left in Mora, let them be wiped out from the whole world",* heralded the beginning of a war of annihilation and expressed the rebellion with the following words:

> *…In April, the rebellion had become widespread. As if they had received a signal from somewhere, the villagers suddenly rose up everywhere and massacred all the Turks they could find, without distinguishing between children, women and men… The song that was passed from mouth to mouth, "Let there be no Turks left in Morea, let them be wiped out from the whole world", heralded the beginning of a war of annihilation. The number of Muslims in Morea was thought to be twenty-five thousand. Within three weeks of the beginning of the rebellion, there were no Muslims left except for a few who had managed to escape to the cities.* (Phillips, 1897: 48; Şimşir, 2017: 30).

The scale of the massacres was so great that very few Peloponnese Turks were able to save their lives. Those who managed to save their lives were forced to migrate from the regions they had known as their homeland for centuries, considered their heritage and made prosperous. On the other hand, the migration process left traces of pain on the Peloponnese Turks as much as the rebellion process. Because they suffered many hardships both during the journey and in the places they reached, struggling with hunger, thirst, lack of money, etc. (Oğuz & Menekşe, 2024: 257).

Migration and Population of Morea Emigrants

During the rebellion, the Turks who had to leave Mora due to fear of their lives began to migrate to safer regions, primarily Istanbul and the Western Anatolian coasts, by any means they could find. Because Istanbul, Izmir, Kusadasi, Antalya, Edirne, Varna, Preveza, Yanya, Tirhala and Egypt became the settlement areas for these immigrants (Ipek, 2005: 98). The population information of the Mora immigrants registered in the Izmir Sanjak Districts is given in the table below.

Table 1: Population of Morea Emigrants Registered in İzmir Sanjak Districts (Household-Population)

	H.1246/ M.1830-31 Census		**AH 1259/AD 1843-44 Census**	
The immigrants	**Number of Households**	**Male Population**	**Number of Households**	**Male Population**
Peaceful Mora Immigrants in Nefs-i Izmir	61	119	61	120
Calm Kizilhisar Immigrants in Cesme District	78	142	30	70
Kizilhisar Refugees Calm in Alacati Town of Cesme District	20	48	4	9
Kizilhisar Refugees Calm in Seferihi-sar Town	96	220	96	216
Kizilhisar Refugees Calm in Sığacık Castle of Seferihisar District	76	156	74	148
Kizilhisar Refugees Calm in Tepecik Village of Seferihisar District	2	3	2	3
Kizilhisar Immigrants Temporarily Settled Around Hereke, Seferihisar District	27	64	21	49
Calm Benefşe Immigrants in Kuşadası	**252**	**536**	**243**	**513**
Peaceful Mora Immigrants in Söke Town	29	57	29	55

Immigrants Added to the Population Book Later				
Refugees from Anatolia	4	9	2	3
Gastonian immigrants say the canine of Mora	10	20	8	17
Kizilhisar Immigrants	22	39	21	38
Total	**677**	**1,413**	**591**	1,241

Source: (Menekşe, 2024:227).

Table 1, shows the population data for the 1830-1831 and 1843-1844 censuses together. In the 1830-1831 general census, it was determined that 1,413 male immigrants were registered in 677 households in the districts of İzmir, Çeşme, Seferihisar, Kuşadası, and Söke. In the 1843-1844 census, it was stated that 1,241 male immigrants were registered in 591 households. Assuming that there were as many females as males, and multiplying the male population by two, it is estimated that there were at least 2,826 immigrants from Mora in the 1830-1831 general census and at least 2,482 immigrants from Mora in the 1843-1844 census within the İzmir Sanjak. The population difference between the two censuses was due to the demographic events that occurred. Indeed, among the immigrants, there were newborns, those who died and those who went to another place. It is stated that the following notes were added to the names of these immigrants: "born", "deceased", " reft " (departed) (Menekşe, 2024: 227-228).

It is also possible to obtain data on the population of Morea immigrants who migrated to Antalya District from archive records. Because it was determined that 522 male Morea immigrants were registered in Antalya in the census of 1830-1831 (Karal, 1995: 122). It is also possible to obtain data on the population of Morea immigrants in Antalya from the population books of 1840-1841. The population of Morea immigrants recorded in the books of 1840-1841 is given in the table below:

Table 2: Places Where Morea Immigrants Lived in Antalya According to the 1840-1841 Census			
Neighborhood Name in the Castle	**Number of Emigrants from Morea**	**Neighborhood Name Outside the Castle**	**Number of Emigrants from Morea**
Cami-i Cedid	4	Timurcu Suleyman	38
Cami-i Atik	9	Bali Bey	7
Makbul Aga	7	Divan Piri	0
Hatib Suleyman	8	Kızılsaray	27
Mecdeddin	11	Elmalı	13
Has Balaban	6	Asık Dogan	2
Karadaî (Karadayi)	1	Sagir Bey	7
Iskender Celebi	0	Keçi Bali	7
Baba Dogan	2	Şeyh Sinan	44
Tuzcular	6	Çavuş Bahçesi	2
Cullah Kara	1	Tahıl Pazarı	0
Ahi Yusuf	4	Igdir Hasan	9
Ahi Kızı	0	Şücaeddin	5
		Sofular	23
		Arab Mescidi	8
		Araban (Urban)	0
		Kızılharim	0
		Takyeci Mustafa	33
		Kirişçiler	2
		Meydan	0
		Timurcu Kara	3
Total	**59**		230
		Grand Total	**289**

Source: (Oguz, 2025:159).

As can be seen from Table 2, a total of 289 Mora immigrants were recorded in Antalya in the 1840-1841 census. When this population is considered as male and female and multiplied by at least "2", it is estimated to be 578. Apart from this, the Antalya Temettuat Registers for the years 1844-1845 also provide information about the population of Mora immigrants. Because the population information of the immigrants in the mentioned registers is as given in the table below:

Neighborhoods Where Morea İmmigrants Lived in Antalya in the Temettuat Records of 1844-1845		
Neighborhoods	**Total Number of Households**	**Number of Households of Morea Emigrants**
Sagir Bey	70	5
Cami-i Atik	48	4
Cullah Kara	13	1
Timurcu Suleyman	94	30
Has Balaban	33	3
Bali Bey	65	4
Tuzcular	45	3
Hatib Suleyman	28	2
Sofular	59	12
Ahi Yusuf	31	6
Divan Piri	20	1
Arab Mescidi	34	5
Aşık Dogan	56	1
Takyeci Mustafa	65	21
Kızılsaray	117	55
Igdir Hasan	47	6
Şeyh Sinan	21	4
Keçi Bali	37	11
Araban (Urban)	24	1
Yarbaşı Çandırı	52	1
Total	**959**	**176**

Source: (Oguz, 2025: 172).

As can be understood from Table 3, according to the Antalya Temettuat Book records, there are 176 households of Mora immigrants in Antalya. When it is considered that there are at least "2" people, male and female, in a household, the total number of immigrants is calculated as 352. In this case, it is seen that there is a decrease in the immigrant population compared to the population books of 1830-1831 and 1840-1841. Considering that there may be births, deaths and the population moving to a different place, it can be said that the population difference is due to the population events experienced (Oğuz, 2025: 171).

Migration and Population of Morea Refugees to Kuşadası

It is seen that during the rebellion, there was frequent migration to Kuşadası, one of the places where the immigrants migrated. For example, on August 5, 1821, the Turks in Benefşe Castle, who surrendered to the rebels, were allowed to leave their property and assets behind and pass to Kuşadası by ship. Thus, around 700 immigrants were brought to Kuşadası (Mehmed Es'ad, 2000: 155). At the end of 1822 and the beginning of 1823, a group of 3,000 soldiers and local people from the castles that were captured by the rebel Greeks were transported to İzmir and Kuşadası by Çamlıca and British ships (İpek, 2022: 106). Again, on January 22, 1823, around 2,500 women and men who were able to escape the massacre at the Anabolu Castle, which was taken over by the rebellious Greeks, set off to be taken to the coast of Kuşadası with ten boats belonging to Çamlıca Island (Menekşe, 2020: 807). Since the children and relatives of many of the immigrants who reached Kuşadası had come with the previous boats, they requested to go to Çeşme to gather in one place (*BOA., HAT.,* 904/ 29693, 18 Cemaziyelevvel 1238/ 31 January 1823). Walsh included the following information in his travelogue about the transfer of the Turks from Anabolu to Kuşadası:

> *When Captain Hamilton had directed his guns towards the town and the Greeks and had them within firing range, he dropped anchor and sent my friend, First Lieutenant Scott, to the shore with a group of marines and crew from the navy, to supervise the evacuation of the garrison, taking some to Cambrian and sending some to Kuşadası on other ships... However, Scott had drawn up a road from the castle gate to the shore with his limited force and had 600 Turks, along with their wives and children, pass through here and board the ships... The entire garrison, consisting of 900 people, was taken on seven ships belonging to the Ipsarans and sent to Kuşadası... A considerable number of the sick and weak were taken to Cambrian and taken to İzmir, but despite all efforts, 40 of them could not be saved.* (Walsh, 2021: 295).

One of the boats carrying the people of Anabol was captured by bandits off the coast of Kuşadası. The bandits took the people on the boat captive and demanded that twelve Greek women from Kuşadası be handed over to be released. However, the guard Mustafa Reşid Pasha gave the bandits a stern warning, stating that if any of the Turkish captives were harmed, all Greek men in Kuşadası would be put to the sword and their children would be taken captive. Following this threat, the bandits killed some of the Turkish captives and released 80 people after completely robbing them. The remaining approximately 25 women and children were taken to Samos; then, after paying a ransom of 4,100 kuruş, they were brought back to Kuşadası (Örenç, 2020: 114-115).

The migration movement towards Kuşadası and İzmir was so great that according to the information given in 1828, there was no place suitable for settlement in these regions. For this reason, İzmir Guard Hasan Pasha and Kuşadası Guard Mustafa Reşid Pasha suggested that the newly arrived immigrants be sent to other settlement areas. In line with this, it was requested that the immigrants who came later, primarily around 600 from Balyabadra, be settled in the suitable areas of Manisa, Hüdavendigar, Menteşe and Kütahya (*BOA., HAT.,* 850/38091, 15 Rebiülevvel 1244/ 25 September 1828).

The population registers of the Mora immigrants settled in Kuşadası in the years 1830-1831 provide important clues. Because in the population registers numbered 2908 and 2909, it is possible to determine where the Mora immigrants came from and their population. In a study conducted on the subject, it was determined that the majority of the immigrants registered in Kuşadası Town were from Benefşe. It was also stated that a small number of immigrants from Anabol, Eğriboz, Moton, Navarin (Anavarin), Mizistre, Bardunya, Laleli (Lalalı), Arkadya and Tripoli were also recorded (Menekşe, 2021: 239-241). In the 1830-1831 census, the population of the Benefşe immigrants detected in Kuşadası was determined to be 536 in 252 households. In the 1843-1844 census, 513 inhabitants were recorded in 243 households (Menekşe, 2024: 227-228).

Migration and Population of Morea Emigrants to Antalya

Although it is possible to follow the Morea immigrants who migrated to the Western Anatolian coast, Istanbul and the islands from archive records, it is difficult to follow those who came to Antalya. Therefore, it is not clear exactly when they came to Antalya. Danieloğlu wrote on the subject that the Morea immigrants came to Antalya in 1822 or 1823 (Danieloğlu, 2010: 141). Apart from this, E.

Sperling, who visited Antalya in 1862, stated that the Morea immigrants he saw in the city came in 1822-1823 and that their number was 400 households (Sperling, n.d. (as cited in Koç University AKMED, 2025). These dates also coincide with the period when the rebellion started to become increasingly violent from its first days.

According to the 1840-1841 population records, the Morea immigrants came mostly from Arkadya, Koron, Bardunya/Bardinye, Moton, Andurya, Navarin and Anabolu regions (BOA. *NFS.d.,* 3205). The records of the 1844-1845 census also provide information about the Morea immigrants in Antalya. The neighborhoods where the immigrants were concentrated were mostly in the part of the city called the castle. At the same time, the poorer immigrants lived on the "thatched roofs" in Şarampol. In the 1841 Sharia registry record, it is stated that Zeynep Hatun, who lived on thatched roofs at the head of the Şarampol area of Antalya, passed away, and that her heirs were a person named Hüseyin and his uncle Bekir (AŞS. 19/388b, 5 Rebiülahir 1257/ 27 May 1841). Apart from this, some of the immigrants had to take shelter in coffeehouses in the cities and ports (BOA. NFS.d. 3230, 1 Rebiülevvel 1261/ 10 March 1845).

As a result, it can be said that there is a considerable population of Morea immigrants in both regions, which are places of migration. This situation brings about change and transformation in the demographic, social, economic, political etc. life of the region to which migration is made. On the other hand, it also makes relations with the local people and other immigrant groups inevitable.

Integration Processes of Morea Immigrants in Antalya and Kuşadası Settlements

Migrants bring their own cultural background, lifestyle, and perspective on life and society to the region they arrive in (Karpat, 2014: XXXVIII). This situation necessitates the coexistence of an existing cultural accumulation in the region and individuals with different backgrounds, in other words, the formation of a common living space. While a common living space is being formed, the immigrants experience some adaptation problems. Therefore, another difficulty awaiting the immigrants is the process of cultural and social adaptation (Tekeli, 1990: 69).

When the Morea immigrants settled in Antalya and Kuşadası entered an adaptation process in a different region, it was inevitable for them to communicate with both the local population and other immigrant groups. The communication of the Morea immigrants with these groups was also important for the continuity of their existence in the region. Despite this, in the first years after the migration process, their communication with the local population did not progress sufficiently due to both the differences in spoken language and their own traditions. This situation caused them to keep their distance from the local population. Likewise, the local population, aware of these differences, kept their distance from the immigrants (Oğuz, 2025: 240).

One of the most important reasons why the Morea immigrants were distant from the local people was the differences in spoken language. The fact that the Morea immigrants spoke Greek while the local people spoke Turkish also affected their social life (Menekşe, 2020: 817). Despite this, the Greeks in Antalya began to relearn their forgotten mother tongue thanks to the Morea immigrants (Beaufort, 2002: 129). Regarding the subject, E. Sperling, who visited Antalya in 1862, stated that the Morea immigrants retaught the "Turkicized" Greeks their mother tongue and revived their national feelings (Sperling, nd, as cited in Koç University AKMED, 2025). As a result, although the difference in spoken language created a barrier between the locals and the Morea immigrants, it also increased their relations with the Greeks.

The Morea immigrants who settled in Kuşadası, as in the case of Antalya, had some disagreements with the local people. This was caused especially by their inability to speak Turkish. However, the fact that Kuşadası was close to the Aegean Islands and that some Greek gangs attacked the shores of Kuşadası by boat during the 1821 Morea Rebellion may have also been effective. Because it is thought that the reason for the local population's prejudice and distance towards the Morea immigrants was that the Morea immigrants spoke Greek, like the rebellious Greeks (Oğuz, 2025: 294).

When the relevant population registers are examined, the difference between the population of Morea immigrants in Antalya and in Kuşadası is striking. While a total of 1,413 Morea immigrants were recorded in Kuşadası in the 1830-1831 Population Registers (Menekşe, 2024: 227-228), 522 Morea immigrants were recorded in Antalya on the same date (Karal, 1955: 122). This situation is due to Kuşadası being closer to the Morea Peninsula and being one of the first migration stops for immigrants. The fact that the immigrant population in Kuşadası is larger caused them to carry out the adaptation process with their own internal dynamics. This situation limited their interaction with the local people, causing the adaptation

process to progress slowly compared to Antalya. In Antalya, the neighborhoods where Morea immigrants and local people resided also caused distance. While the Morea immigrants were settled more densely in the neighborhoods of the city outside the castle, the local people lived inside the castle. This situation prevented cultural exchange and communication (Oğuz, 2025: 288).

Due to the above reasons, the immigrants established more relationships among themselves. Because in Kuşadası, the local people kept the Mora immigrants away from all kinds of shopping, and exchanging girls with each other was not welcomed (Belen, 2004: 96). This situation caused a distance between the immigrants and the local people. In Antalya, due to the distance that initially formed between the two groups, the immigrants established more ties among themselves. The most effective way to do this was to establish interaction between families through marriage. For example, in Antalya, Moralı İbrahim Ağa's sister Derya Hanım married Moralı Tosun Paşa's son Salih Efendi (Beden, 2004: 230). Similarly, Moralı İbrahim Ağa married Moralı Tosun Paşa's daughter Fatma Hatun (Dayar, 2018: 32). In addition to establishing a relationship with each other through marriage, the immigrants also acted as each other's guardians, witnesses or representatives in many cases, and this situation is reflected in the archive sources of the period (Beden, 2004: 114).

In Antalya, the group that the Morea immigrants had the most contact with was the Arab immigrants. Because the Arab immigrants settled in the Antalya district constantly came together with the Morea immigrants on issues such as marriage, trade, etc. For example, Arab Süleyman Efendi married Zeynep Hanım, the daughter of Moralı İbrahim Ağa (Dayar, 2019: 115). Marriages between the two immigrant groups are frequently encountered in the Antalya Şer›İyye Sicili Books. Apart from this, the active role played by the Arab and Morea immigrants, especially in the field of trade, was effective in strengthening this bilateral relationship (Oğuz, 2025: 245). At the same time, these two immigrant groups played an important role in the commercial life of the city over time. This situation even caused the local population to rebel after a while. Because certain employment areas in Antalya were monopolized by Arab and Morean immigrants over time, and the job opportunities of local tradesmen and craftsmen were limited in parallel with this situation (Dayar, 2018: 24). It was also seen that Arab and Morean immigrants stood side by side in these negativities between locals and immigrants. For example, more than one Morean merchant and tradesman were signed on a petition prepared against the accusations against Arab immigrant merchants Hacı Ömer Ağa and Süleyman Efendi (BOA, *İ. MVL*, 399-17360, lef: 12a (a), 20 Zilhicce 1274/ 1 August 1858).

It is seen that there was cooperation in relations with Arab immigrants in Antalya who were in the same process, they acted together and traded. Therefore, having a group of immigrants like themselves in the process of holding on to life provided them with an advantage in a sense. However, such a situation did not exist for the immigrants of Morea in Kuşadası, and the communication they established remained constant among themselves. Thus, the integration process progressed more slowly compared to Antalya.

It is seen that the Mora immigrants in Kuşadası were not as prominent in the commercial life of the city as in the Antalya example. In this respect, some of the negativities experienced in Antalya in terms of profession are not encountered in the Kuşadası example. Because the Mora immigrants in Kuşadası were more interested in business lines such as daily workers, servants, grocers, coffee shops, tailors and greengrocers (Menekşe, 2024: 240). This situation did not create a conflict area with the local people in areas such as trade etc. as in the Antalya example. At the same time, no relationship was established with a different immigrant group in areas such as trade etc. as in Antalya.

The cultural and class differences between the Mora immigrants and the local people are also evident in other areas. Because the clothing style and consumption habits of the two groups are also among the elements that create these differences. For example, while the local people used shalwar, robes and turbans, the Mora immigrants were distinguished by their use of shirts, belts, vests and fezzes. Apart from this, the Mora immigrants frequently used items that could be examples of westernized consumption that the local people did not use. Examples of these items obtained from the estate records are goblets, Frankish chests, paintings, hourglasses, blue and white cups (Beden, 2004: 232). Apart from the different cultural elements they brought to the city, the Mora immigrants were renowned among the people as masters of culinary arts and as people who were loyal to their debts. As a result, this situation was also an indicator of their changing positions in society over time. At the same time, a quatrain was even written about the beauty of the Mora immigrant girls:

I bought salt from the grocery store
Don't take the girl from the local,
If you take it, take the morale
It has both taste and salt. (Çimrin, 2012: 460).

As can be understood from the examples given, although the Mora immigrants in Antalya were initially distant from the local people, this situation changed

over time. Likewise, there were no separatist movements against the immigrants in the city. As a result, despite certain differences between the immigrant groups and the local people during the integration process, all segments of society got used to living together (Oğuz, 2025, p.255). Thus, with the settlement of the Mora immigrants in the city, the human mosaic of Antalya became quite diverse. In this respect, he explained the harmony between the different cultural groups of Antalya as follows:

> *There was an intercultural dialogue. Everyone was respectful of each other. For example, when Muslims went to the mosque on the "Night of Power", Christians would also come to visit the Beard of the Prophet. When corners were made to symbolize the birth of Jesus at Christmas, Muslims and Jews would also go and watch. When a funeral passed through the middle of the market, shopkeepers and coffeehouse owners would stand up, take off their hats and salute* (Çimrin, 2012: 462).

In Kuşadası, due to the distance between them and the locals, the immigrants created another cemetery for themselves (Belen, 2004: 96). This Moralı cemetery was established in front of the Kuşadası Marina where the second public beach was reopened. The Mora immigrants buried their bodies in this cemetery until 1931. After Atatürk visited the region, Mayor Sedat Akdoğan removed the cemeteries on the beach and the bodies were moved to the Adalızâde Cemetery, which is currently the only cemetery in Kuşadası (Belen, 2004: 96). In Antalya, there was no question of creating a separate cemetery for the Mora immigrants. Because, in the field study, it was determined that they were together with the local people.

Despite some disagreements between the Mora immigrants and the local people in Kuşadası, harmony was achieved between the two groups over time. After the integration process was completed, the immigrants even took their place in the government positions in the region. For example, it is determined that the first mayor of Kuşadası, Hacı İbrahim Ağa (1879/1296), was a Mora immigrant. However, it is known that names from Hacı İbrahim Ağa's generation also served as mayors during the Republican period. Apart from this, it is stated that Hasana Bey, the father of Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, who had a very important place in the history of the National Struggle and was the mayor of Kuşadası in 1900, was also a Mora immigrant (Belen, 2004: 96-97). The first headman of Kızılsaray Neighborhood, where the immigrants were most densely located in Antalya, was also a Mora immigrant. Today, this neighborhood is still under the headmanship of Recep Şengün, who belongs to the same generation of Mora immigrants (Oğuz, 2025: 267).

Conclusion

During and after the 1821 Mora Rebellion, the Mora Turks who managed to hold on to life migrated to regions where they could be safe and rebuild their lives. After the migration process, the immigrants entered a process of adapting to the region and the local people of that region. When the examples of Kuşadası and Antalya among these migration regions are examined, it is not seen that the Mora immigrants and the local people experienced a major disagreement. Despite all their differences, the two groups integrated with each other over time. Despite this, the adaptation process in both regions did not progress at the same pace. Because there are no incidents that caused a separatist event in the relations of the Mora immigrants who settled in Antalya with the local people. However, due to the distance between the local people and the Mora immigrants in Kuşadası, the immigrants created a separate cemetery for themselves. However, it is seen that a common cemetery was created in Antalya. In addition, it has been determined that marriages between the local people and the immigrants in Kuşadası were not welcomed for a period. When we look at the example of Antalya, shortly after the adaptation process, marriages between the two groups were considered normal and this situation is also reflected in the archive documents of the period.

There are three factors that are effective in the differences experienced in the integration of immigrants in these two settlement areas: 1) Geography 2) Proximity to the rebellion region 3) Social structure in the settlement area. First of all, when the geography factor is considered; Kuşadası has already been a region with a dense Greek population. In Antalya, the large Turkish population has ensured that the local people do not feel any threat. At the same time, Kuşadası has received more migration than Antalya during this process, which has caused the local people in the region to be affected more negatively. Secondly, the prejudiced approach in Kuşadası also stems from the fact that the rebellion has spread to areas such as Kuşadası, İzmir and Seferihisar. Because the rebels' landing in Kuşadası and carrying out looting operations have also led to a reaction against the immigrants coming from Morea. This dilemma experienced in Kuşadası has also caused distance. Because the Turks coming from Morea and the rebels speaking Greek have caused the local people to keep their distance from the immigrants. Apart from this, while the immigrants who migrated to Kuşadası entered into an integration process only with the local people, the immigrants who migrated to Antalya also entered into an integration process with the Arab immigrants. This situation allowed the two different immigrant groups to interact and balance this process. When we look at the example of Kuşadası,

there is no immigrant group that can be interacted with other than the local people at that time.

Although there were some disagreements and distances at the beginning, the immigrants provided important services in the administrative, political, economic and cultural areas of the region. For example, the first mayor of Kuşadası was a Mora immigrant, while the first headman of the Kızılsaray Neighborhood in Antalya was also a Mora immigrant. Similarly, there are often names belonging to the Mora immigrant generation among the politicians in the parliament. It is known that the immigrants undertook important duties in the defense of the homeland during the National Struggle.

Ultimately, a migration movement, regardless of the reason, is not just a movement of displacement. However, migrants are not just numerical data in the regions they are in or leave. Because migrants take their own identities, cultures and many other social elements with them to the regions they migrate to. This situation deeply affects both the social structure of the region they leave and the social structure of the region where they establish a new life.

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II

EU ENLARGEMENT, CHALLENGES, AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

RUSSIA IN THE EU'S BACKYARD: HOW RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN SERBIA CHALLENGES EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract: Since the early 2000s, the European Union's enlargement policy has been its most effective tool for expanding its influence in the Western Balkans. However, in recent years, as the EU struggles with "enlargement fatigue", this policy has become slow and inefficient, creating windows of opportunity for third countries to exploit. One of the most prominent actors taking advantage of these shortcomings is Russia, which has managed to consolidate its foothold in Serbia, countering EU influence and obstructing Belgrade's accession path. As a result, Russia's geopolitical strategy in the Western Balkans- particularly in Serbia—has emerged as a direct challenge to the EU's enlargement policy. This paper examines Russia's ambitions in the Balkans through Hans Morgenthau's theoretical framework of national interests, illustrating the region's significance in Moscow's broader geopolitical strategy. The findings demonstrate that Russia perceives the Balkans as a crucial front in its effort to limit Western expansion. By analyzing Russia's strategic objectives and the means employed to achieve them-such as diplomatic support to Serbia on the Kosovo issue, energy dependency, military cooperation, and soft power projection- the study highlights the Kremlin's role as a disruptive force in Serbia's EU accession process. By consolidating its influence in Serbia Russia aims to maintain the country's strategic ambiguity, ensuring that Belgrade remains politically and economically dependent on Moscow and thus making EU accession an increasingly challenging prospect. The study's conclusion underscores the significant negative impact of Russian influence on the EU's enlargement policy. By applying Morgenthau's theory of national interests, this paper offers a framework for analyzing Russia's geopolitical strategy and its implications for Serbia's European path. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on EU enlargement by highlighting the interplay between external influence and regional integration challenges. Furthermore, the study indicates that unless Brussels adopts a more proactive and cohesive enlargement strategy, Russian influence in Serbia will continue to undermine the EU's long-term objectives in the Balkans. Therefore, a revitalized and strategically coherent EU enlargement policy is essential to counteract Russian influence and reaffirm Brussels role as the primary external actor shaping the Balkans' geopolitical future.

Keywords: EU Enlargement policy, Russian influence, Western Balkans

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reignited Western anxieties about Moscow's foreign policy ambitions – nowhere more so than in the Balkans, often described as "the most vulnerable region of Europe" (Anastasakis, 2019). This renewed attention has brought to the forefront long-standing debates about the nature, scope, and consequences of Russian involvement in the region. The literature on the subject spans a wide spectrum of interpretations. Most scholars appear at best suspicious and at worst fearful of the Russian presence: for the former it merely delays reforms and encourages democratic backsliding in sensitive areas such as the rule of law and media freedom, for the latter it sets the stage for a new Cold War-like confrontation, where Great Powers instrumentalize local actors to project influence on the geopolitical chessboard. Others adopt a more reassuring stance, considering the Russian threat to be overstated. In their view, the Kremlin's involvement is largely symbolic, designed to generate nationalist support at home rather than to project significant power abroad. Meanwhile, a few pro-Russian analysts contend that Russia's actions in the region are not inherently anti-Western but rather reflect an interest in maintaining a voice in an area where it has historically exerted cultural, political, and economic influence (Panagiotou, 2020).

Yet despite this wide range of interpretations, one key development stands out: since the end of the Cold War, most Balkan countries have pursued Euro-Atlantic integration, joining the European Union and, in many cases, NATO. Serbia, however, remains a notable exception. Although formally committed to EU accession, Serbia continues to nurture strong ties with Russia, creating a paradox. This dual alignment – with Serbia's already prolonged accession process to the EU coinciding with the persistence and even strengthening of its close ties with Russia – raises critical questions about external influence in the region and the limits of the EU's transformative power.

This paper seeks to examine the essence and implications of Russia's engagement in the Balkans – focusing particularly on Serbia – and to analyze how it affects the EU enlargement process. To do so, it adopts Hans Morgenthau's theory of national interest as an analytical lens, since it allows for a systematic categorization of a state's foreign policy goals. Methodologically, the study is based on qualitative research drawing primarily from academic literature, policy papers, scientific journals, and expert analyses. It argues that Russia's influence in Serbia acts as a disruptive force to the EU enlargement policy, not necessarily by offering a viable alternative model, but by complicating the domestic and geopolitical conditions required for sustained reform and alignment with EU standards

– most notably in the case of Serbia. Overall, understanding the rationale behind Russia's Balkan engagement – beyond historical, ideological, or emotional narratives – is crucial for combating the ongoing issues and overcoming the current impasse.

The first chapter outlines the theoretical foundations of Morgenthau's concept of national interest, while the second examines Russia's goals and methods in the Balkans, identifying the core elements of its regional policy. The next chapter bridges theory and practice discussed in the first two chapters, respectively by categorizing Russian national interests in the Balkans according to Morgenthau's framework and showcasing how they contribute to the development or limitation of Russian involvement in the region. The last two chapters before the conclusion focus on Serbia, analyzing how Russian influence materializes in the country and how the resulting Serbian balancing act promotes broader Russian interests and prolongs Serbia's accession to the EU. The conclusion reflects on what these findings imply for Brussels' ability to reform and integrate the Western Balkans, providing valuable insights for further research on the disruptive consequences of third-party influence in the region.

Defining the National Interest: Morgenthau's framework

Since antiquity, scholars have emphasized the importance of national interests. From Thucydides – the so-called "father of international relations" – who almost 24 centuries ago laid the foundations of the concept in his "History of the Peloponnesian War" (Platias & Koliopoulos, 2025), to Nicolo Machiavelli's (2014) exhortation to the Prince to prioritize national interest by any means necessary, to present-day interpretations, national interests have been set as a cornerstone of the realist tradition in International Relations. Indeed, in an anarchic international system defined by competition, insecurity, and, therefore, conflict, every state is obliged to pursue its own interests to survive. This is where scholarly consensus ends, however, despite the literature on the subject being voluminous. In the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition, the addition of overlapping theoretical terms like "organized interests", the "public interest" or "global interests", and more practical issues like the prioritization of interests, the allocation of precious resources or the reconciliation of interests during negotiations in the discussion further perplexes foreign policy making and analysis (Clinton, 1994· Khan, 2022).

Hans Morgenthau's framework cuts through this ambiguity, standing out amidst the theoretical chaos for its depth and enduring relevance. Although the founder of post-war realist thought and the main exponent of the neoclassical current of realism does not provide a clear definition of the national interest, he examines many aspects of the notion, from its nature and application to its consequences. In summary, Morgenthau (1985) thinks that national interest is defined in terms of power, since "international politics is nothing more than a struggle for power". Power, in addition to being the goal, is also the means for pursuing the goals of a state (Ibid). It is therefore important for political leaders to pursue the "lesser of two evils" (Morgenthau, 1958), distinguishing between the feasible and the unfeasible, given that goals are unlimited, while resources are limited (Morgenthau, 1985). Consequently, according to Morgenthau (1985) national interest is determined rationally – through a cost-benefit analysis that minimizes risks and maximizes gains. These calculations result in a national interest that is objective can be the guide for the state's international behavior and is common to all states. In other words, it constitutes the "language" that all states speak – the common "currency" that they use in their transactions in the international system regardless of their domestic regime (Clinton, 1994).

Beyond these theoretical thoughts, Morgenthau also provides a practical framework to classify national interests. His typology is not found in a single volume, rather, his insights are dispersed across several works. Yet, when pieced together, they form a coherent theoretical model. Morgenthau categorizes national interests based on their importance into vital and secondary, based on their duration into permanent and variable, and based on their specificity into general and specific.

More specifically, vital interests include the very survival of the state and the protection of its physical, political and cultural identity. These interests are usually common to all states regardless of size, must be defended at all costs and therefore cannot be compromised. Notably, they may at times extend beyond state borders for precautionary reasons if a distant state pursues an imperialist policy that may in the future undermine the security of the state (Morgenthau, 1958:50, 51, 66, 178· 1952: 973· 1962: 191, 214, 291). In contrast, secondary interests are those that contribute to the vital ones. Indicative examples are the protection of citizens abroad and the maintenance of appropriate immunities for diplomats. Therefore, they are usually "away" from state borders and are somewhat difficult to define precisely. These interests are more flexible and open to compromise in diplomatic negotiations (Morgenthau, 1962: 191).

Permanent interests are those that remain relatively stable over long periods of time. Change in them is not excluded in advance, but if it does occur, it is slow (Morgenthau, 1952: 973· 1958: 66). In contrast, variable interests are those that a state chooses to consider as its national interests at a particular point in time (in other words, they are short-term), or as Morgenthau states, they are characterized by "the cross current of personalities, public opinion, sectional interests, partisan politics, and political and moral folkways" of a state (Morgenthau, 1952: 973· 1958: 66).

Finally, general interests are those that the state can implement in a large geographical area, in many states or in many specific sectors, such as trade, economy, diplomatic relations, international law, etc. (Morgenthau, 1959: 188, 191, 201). Indicatively, such an interest is Great Britain's concern for maintaining the existing balance of power in continental Europe (Robinson, 1966). On the other hand, specific interests are those that are not included in the general ones. They are usually defined with narrow time limits and complement the general interests (Morgenthau, 1959: 188, 191, 201). For example, borrowing the previous example, if maintaining the balance of power in Europe was a general interest of Great Britain, securing the independence of the Low Countries (a key point for the balance of power) could be a specific one (Robinson, 1966).

Each individual interest can be described using three properties, one from each of the two poles of importance, duration, and specificity. Thus, for example, a national interest can be either vital, permanent, and general, or secondary, variable and specific, or vital, variable and specific, and so on. Consequently, in total, from the combination of the three poles arise eight different types of national interest that a state can promote. Morgenthau himself does not provide a method for prioritizing among interests. However, we can rely on the categories mentioned above to reach relatively safe conclusions (Robinson, 1966). Thus, the vital and permanent should be considered more important than the secondary and variable (ibid), while neither general nor specific should be more important, as they simply indicate time or extent. Beyond that, it remains to decide the hierarchy of the individual interests within each of these eight types of national interests, for which no guidelines are provided by Morgenthau.

It is also worth noting that, beyond this "absolute" typology, Morgenthau provides a "relative" categorization of national interests based on the degree of compatibility between the interests of different states – identical (shared), complementary (mutually beneficial but not the same), and conflicting – that he primarily uses when discussing alliances (Morgenthau, 1950: 146· 1959: 188–189· 1962: 113). While this relative aspect lies outside the scope of the current

analysis, its mention underscores the broader relevance and flexibility of Morgenthau's framework. Thus, overall, his typology offers a robust analytical tool to assess state behavior in the international system. The following chapters will apply this framework to evaluate Russia's national interests in the Balkans and particularly in Serbia.

Russian Foreign Policy in the Balkans

Russia's Balkan aspirations

Russian interests in the Balkans are not newly discovered. Despite never holding the region under its direct control, Moscow's policy has contributed to the Balkan states' political, economic, and cultural formation (Anastasakis, 2019). Over time, its influence has fluctuated due to changing international conditions, but it has never completely disappeared (Massavetas, 2019). International conditions also largely dictated the change in Russia's attitude towards the West over the past decades, from rapprochement and cooperation in the early 1990s to pragmatism after 1999, and finally outright confrontation after 2008 (Samorukov, 2019· Panagiotou, 2020· Vuksanovic, 2023a). In other words, contemporary Russian foreign policy, in essence stems from the conditions that emerged at the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the wars that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia (Vuksanovic, 2023a).

In this context, Russia's ultimate goal is to regain the great power status which it had lost in the 1990s (Zweers et al., 2023). Since then, Moscow has been trying to regain the "lost ground" and restore the international order as close as possible to the status quo ante. As demonstrated by the proxy wars waged by Russia, as well as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, the Kremlin is driven by a kind of "neo-imperial appetite". It considers itself an important geopolitical player on the world stage and tries to convince the West to treat it accordingly (Loshaj, 2024). Consequently, Moscow seeks to replace the unipolar order created by the USA with a multipolar one (with itself as one of the poles), which – in the Russian view – more closely corresponds to modern reality (Secrieru, 2019· Loshaj, 2024). Based on the above, particular emphasis is placed on expanding the remaining Russian spheres of influence and creating new ones where this is feasible, as evidenced by its – so far largely unsuccessful in the Balkans, though more effective in other regions – efforts to promote alternative forms of integration such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) or the BRICS (Hansel & Feyerabend, 2018).

Based on the above, the Balkans function complementary to, and promote precisely the above Russian ambitions (Anastasakis, 2019). Enabled by the West's problematic approach that created a vacuum of power to the region, Russia's main concern is to "fill in the gaps" so it can undermine western policies and prevent the further integration of the Balkan states into NATO and the EU (Stronski & Himes, 2019· Panagiotou, 2020· Zweers et al., 2023· Loshaj, 2024). The cornerstone of its approach lies in creating new and maintaining ongoing disputes between the states of the region (de Waal et al., 2024). These animosities not only postpone – almost indefinitely in some cases – the accession of the Balkan states into Western institutions, but at the same time provide Russia with prime opportunities for more substantial involvement in regional matters. In essence, Moscow can instrumentalize the unresolved issues either as a bargaining tool in a potential negotiation with the West (Panagiotou, 2020), or as leverage to secure the Balkan states' support – or neutrality – in international organizations and fora (Vuksanovic, 2021). Of course, the most prominent example of this policy in action is Russia's support for Serbia in the Kosovo issue and of Republika Srpska's long-standing separatist tendencies.

Evidently, therefore, Russia does not offer any concrete plan to the Balkan states as an alternative to their Western course. On the contrary, its role in the region can be more accurately described as a "spoiler", in the sense that it is limited to simply hindering Western efforts for regional development (Hansel & Feyerabend, 2018· de Waal et al., 2024). In fact, this tactic seems to have an "eye-for-eye" element, since Moscow tends to get involved and create unrest in Western spheres of influence, as retaliation for the West's involvement in areas that the Russians see as their own "backyard" (Secrieru, 2019). The Russian approach is, therefore, a pragmatic/utilitarian one that lacks long-term planning or a clear end goal for the region beyond some general guidelines aimed at short-term gains. Nevertheless, even though Russian Balkan policy is characterized by questionable sustainability in the long run, Russian aspirations in an area like the Balkans which is considered the EU's "soft underbelly" have important political consequences and are among the main factors sustaining the stalemate in the region's Western integration.

Russia's "toolkit" in the Balkans

Although Russia's aspirations in the Balkans remain relatively limited and utilitarian, the means it employs to achieve them are diverse, spanning sectors from the economy and politics to the military. According to several analysts (Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018· Vuksanovic, 2019), Russia's approach is based on three

main pillars: primarily the exploitation of the Kosovo issue and secondarily the energy dependency of the region and Russia's popularity through the projection of soft power.

The Serbo-Albanian rivalry over Kosovo offers the Kremlin an opportunity to assert its influence over the region's future, since Russia's continued diplomatic support for the Serbian side automatically implies that Russia effectively secures a place at the negotiating table for the final settlement of the bilateral dispute. By embracing and defending "the rights of the Serbian people," the Kremlin essentially manages to perpetuate the confrontations over the two most complex and intractable problems in the region: Kosovo and Bosnia & Herzegovina. In order to create further polarization and destabilization – and in the absence of its own forces in the region – Moscow covertly supports local far-right nationalist figures and organizations, which engage in organized crime and sometimes resemble paramilitary organizations (Zweers et al., 2023). At the same time, the Kosovo issue is used by Russia as a precedent to justify its aggressive policy in areas of the former Soviet space. It is characteristic that only a few months after Kosovo declared independence, Moscow invoked it to justify the events in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Samorukov, 2019). The same line of argument was later used to rationalize the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Bechev, 2023· Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025). This paradoxical dual use of the same issue best demonstrates, on the one hand, that Kosovo is at the core of Russian Balkan policy and, on the other hand, that the Russian approach is pragmatic and not altruistic, as Russia likes to portray. It's important to note that this pillar of Russia's Balkan aspirations has remained almost intact even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the small exception of having lost some of its credibility since it exposed the duplicitous nature of Russian policy – which, of course, had already become evident as far back as 2008 and the situation in Georgia.

Moreover, Moscow has made significant investments in sensitive sectors of the Balkan economies, such as energy, fuel processing, tourism, infrastructure, banking and real estate, in which Russian presence can easily translate into political and economic dependence (Stronski & Himes, 2019· Vladimirov, 2019· Panagiotou, 2020). Once this dependence is achieved, the ground is prepared for the further development of other types of Russian influence (Vladimirov, 2019). Energy, however, seems to be the cornerstone of this tactic. Russia is among the world's leading energy producers and exporters, while Russian companies such as Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosneft give Moscow access to a vast network of markets. In fact, prior to the war in Ukraine, these companies also served as instruments

for enhancing Russia's image and influence, since they often financed from individual sports teams (such as the German Schalke 04, or the Serbian Red Star) to entire sports events (such as the Champions League or the Euro 2020) (Wesolowsky, 2024). Taking advantage of the fact that most Balkan countries rely heavily on imported energy to meet their energy needs, the Kremlin seeks to conclude bilateral agreements and create new energy corridors as an alternative to those that pass-through Ukraine (Stronski & Himes, 2019). However, the war in Ukraine has significantly undermined Russia's prior dominance in the Balkan energy sector, since the West's sanctions against Russia and mounting EU's pressure towards the Balkan states have resulted in the latter pursuing their energy diversification and decoupling from Russian-sourced energy.

The above are framed by Russian soft power – that is, the positive image of Russia in the eyes of the ordinary citizen – which offers disproportionately large benefits for Moscow in relation to its "investment". Capitalizing on segments of the public frustration with the West's perceived double standards, empty promises of Euro-Atlantic integration and progressive values, it portrays itself as a reliable partner and defender of traditional values, creating internal pressure on local governments not to pursue anti-Russian policies so as not to alienate these sections of their electorate (Stronski & Himes, 2019· de Waal et al., 2024). To win the "battle for hearts and minds" within the Balkan states, Russia is recruiting, among others, Orthodoxy and Pan-Slavism, to portray an image of timeless solidarity with the Balkan states (Miholjcic-Ivkovic, 2024). The Russian Orthodox Church, armed with the prestige of the last surviving institution of imperial Russia and maintaining close ties with the Russian political leadership, has been transformed from a tool of Russification at home, into a tool for promoting Russian soft power - and therefore the Russian anti-Western version of reality- abroad (Massavetas, 2019· Blitt, 2024). For this purpose, specific historical events are also "illuminated" – such as the Treaty of Küçük-Kainartzi of 1774, which granted the protection of the Orthodox populations of the Ottoman Empire to Russia, or the Russo-Turkish wars that led to the emancipation of the Balkan states from the Ottomans – which sketch the image of "mother Russia" and create the sense of its de facto good relationship with the states of the region (Anastasakis, 2019). The primary audience of this image-building campaign is, of course, the Serbian public, but secondarily also other Slavic and/or Orthodox populations. The wide network of propaganda and disinformation based on both Russian and local media, as well as the close personal contacts of Russian leader Vladimir Putin with local leaders, also significantly contribute to the strengthening of pro-Russian sentiments (Stronski & Himes, 2019). As a domestically

oriented pillar, however, Russian soft power has not been significantly weakened by the war in Ukraine — quite the contrary in cases such as Serbia, as the following sections will demonstrate.

Categorization of Russia's national interests

This chapter uses Morgenthau's framework to categorize Russian national interests in the Balkans, to assess the strategic significance of the region for Moscow. While not exhaustive, the analysis focuses on the most relevant interests currently at stake.

Russia's main overarching goal is the recovery of the Great Power status, thus constituting a vital, permanent and general interest. In this context, weakening Western influence in the Balkans constitutes the backbone of Russia's regional policy, making the prevention of the expansion of NATO and secondarily of the EU a vital, permanent and specific interest. The promotion of a multipolar (sub)system in the Balkans has a complementary role to this, classifying it as a secondary, permanent and general interest. Additional, more specific, interests support the pursuit of these broader strategic goals, with the increase of Russian soft power, the perpetuation of existing tensions and in particular the instrumentalization of the Kosovo issue and the maintenance of the "neutrality" of Serbia being the main axes. The first two cases can be characterized as secondary, permanent and general Russian interests, while the last two as secondary, permanent and specific. Perhaps, however, Serbia's pivotal role for Russian influence in the Balkans – since without it the Russian Balkan footholds would be almost non-existent – allows us to register the preservation of Serbian friendship as a vital, permanent and general Russian interest. Finally, although the economy as a whole is not generally considered a strong aspect of Russia's policy in the Balkans, maintaining influence over the region's energy sector is considered as a vital, permanent, and general interest, since it is the cornerstone of its economic strategy (with clear geopolitical implications) and a symbol of great power strength.

As we can see, the Balkans only have a secondary role in Russia's greater foreign policy goals, since they fulfill more secondary than vital interests. Indeed, it is characteristic that in official Russian foreign policy documents, the Balkans are explicitly mentioned for the last time only in 2013, while in the revised versions of 2015 and 2023 there is no mention at all (Šćepanović, 2023· Zweers et al., 2023). However, because they are close to the regions that Moscow describes as its "near abroad" and the "Russian World" (Massavetas, 2019), the Russian interest remains, even if it functions as complementary to core strategic priorities

(Anastasakis, 2019). This is especially the case regarding Serbia, since all the vital Russian interests that have Balkan extensions (mainly halting West's expansion and -particularly before the Ukraine War- energy dependency) are safeguarded by maintaining close ties with the country. Thus, even though the Balkans play only a secondary role in Russia's global strategy, they remain a crucial space for sustaining its Great Power ambitions—especially through the preservation of its close partnership with Serbia.

Instruments of Russian Influence in Serbia

As mentioned previously, Serbo-Russian relations developed rapidly after NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999 and especially after Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. Since then, Russia has openly supported Serbia, using its veto power as a member of the UN Security Council to obstruct Kosovo's international recognition efforts (Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025). Backed by Moscow, Serbian diplomacy has been engaged in a campaign to delegitimize Pristina's regime by persuading 27 states to withdraw their recognition of Kosovo (Djordjevic, 2024), aiming to prevent it not only from becoming a full UN member, but also from obtaining observer status (Kosovo Online, 2023a). Meanwhile, Russia's help has been instrumental in ensuring that the door of important international institutions such as INTERPOL and UNESCO remain closed to Pristina (Kosovo Online, 2023b).

Russian diplomatic support, of course, is not provided without compensation. In addition to Russia's gains from its involvement in the Kosovo issue mentioned in previous chapters, an equally important consequence is that Serbia has largely become a diplomatic "hostage" of Russia, committed to avoiding NATO membership (Samorukov, 2019). This, of course, means that Russia's main pillar of influence in Serbia is very strong and that Serbian friendship -arguably the most vital Russian Balkan interest- is ensured.

This close diplomatic relationship quickly contributed to the strengthening of their bilateral relations in all sectors. Notable examples include a bilateral strategic cooperation agreement and a loan to cover the Serbia's budget deficit that accompanied Alexandar Vucic's rise to power (Vuksanovic, 2023b), a Free-Trade agreement with the EEU and Russia that makes Serbia the only state outside the Commonwealth of Independent States to be a contracting party (Panagiotou, 2020), and a bilateral Defense Agreement that includes, among other things, provisions for training and joint exercises, armament programs and information exchange (Stronski & Himes, 2019· Panagiotou, 2020). Overall, however, the central element of Russian investments in Serbia is not so much purely economic profits, but dependence and political influence (Zweers et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the most important sector of Russian "hard power" in Serbia has always been the energy sector. In total, the Russian companies Lukoil and Gazprom have invested $20 billion in Serbia since 2000 (Garcevic, 2021), while particularly significant was Gazprom's acquisition of the state-owned Serbian oil company NIS in 2008. Given the very low purchase price and the timing, some analysts described this particular transaction as a "gift" from Belgrade to Moscow because of the latter's support for the former in the Kosovo issue (Stronski & Himes, 2019· Garcevic, 2021). This, of course, is a prominent example of how Russia's different sources of influence interplay with each other to produce favorable outcomes for Moscow. Furthermore, Belgrade has always been part of Russian plans for the construction of new pipelines, through which Russian energy can reach the European markets bypassing Ukraine, as evidenced by Serbia's inclusion in both South Stream and Turkish Streams with billions-worth of Russian investments (Garcevic, 2021). The fact that Serbia is the only Western Balkan country to be included highlights Serbia's special weight in Russian calculations and demonstrates Russia's attempt to turn Serbia into an energy "hostage" beyond a diplomatic one to ensure its cooperation.

However, some sources report that this aspect of Serbian-Russian relations has been particularly tested by the war in Ukraine, since Western sanctions have forced Serbia to promote its energy diversification. For example, the construction of new crude oil refineries and a connection to the Bulgarian energy infrastructure (and thus to the LNG terminal in Alexandroupolis, Greece) have already been planned, while a new agreement was signed in 2023 for the supply of natural gas from Azerbaijan (McBride, 2023· Samorukov, 2023). Also, considering the imminent US sanctions against Russian-owned energy infrastructure in the region, Belgrade is (again) under pressure to ensure that Gazprom's stake in NIS is sold (Gotev, 2025· Euractiv, 2025), and this time it won't be as easy to escape by just making small changes in the company's ownership structure (Samorukov, 2023). This means that the foundations of Russia's second pillar of Balkan influence have started to shake, despite previously being laid deep in Serbia.

The above are complemented by Russian soft power, which has yielded enormous benefits in the case of Serbia. Paradoxically, Russian soft power – especially regarding Serbia – is not defined according to Joseph Nye's (2004) classic definition of soft power, that is, the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and foreign policy. On the contrary, it is derived not from what Russia is but what it isn't: Russia is not the West, therefore not only is it not burdened with the bitter memories of the 1990s but also impersonates the power that opposes Western primacy (Vuksanovic et al., 2022· Vuksanovic, 2023a· de Waal et

al., 2024). Of course, this is also exploited by the Serbian leadership, which to a large extent needs Russia to survive: precisely because Moscow has undertaken to support Serbian positions on their national issues, if a Serbian politician neglects to play the "Russian card" he risks being labeled a traitor (Vuksanovic, 2021). In fact, visiting the Kremlin to "prove" their Russophile stance – particularly before elections – has become something like an unwritten rule for Serbian politicians to muster the electorate's support regardless of their party (Vuksanovic, 2021· Zweers et al., 2023). This phenomenon stands true considering Vucic's recent trip to Moscow to attend the military parade so he can deflect some of the domestic pressure from the biggest anti-corruption protests in Serbia's recent history (Božović, 2025· Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025). Consequently, Serbia's government must always maintain a hard enough stance on Kosovo, since being less committed to Kosovo than Russia is entails great political risk (Samorukov, 2019).

Also, the narratives of historical Slavic and Orthodox unity and friendship that Russia is promoting find fertile ground to flourish in the domestic environment of Serbia (Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018). Certain nationalist figures and organizations operating within Serbia - but which often also have cross-border capabilities - have become vehicles for Russian ambitions. Allegedly these entities usually have some connection to organized crime (like the "Night Wolves" or the "Serbian Honor") and some even appear to possess limited paramilitary capabilities (like the "Union of Balkan Cossacks" or the "National Watch") (Stronski & Himes, 2019· Zweers et al., 2023). Some analysts also perceive institutions like the Russo-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Nis or charitable organizations established by Russian "Oligarchs" to promote Russian culture (like Konstantin Malofeev's St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation) as bases of covert Russian operations to promote Moscow's anti-Western "reading" of the international order (Stronski & Himes, 2019· Staniček & Caprile, 2023· Zweers et al, 2023).

However, the institution with the greatest resonance inside and outside Serbia that has become the bearer of Russian positions is none other than the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Having around 8 million members throughout the Balkans and being a key player in the ecclesiastical "game of thrones" in the region, it enjoys significant influence in Serbian society (Zweers et al., 2023). Although de jure it is an Autocephalous Church and therefore not subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, de facto its close contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) – which is closely linked to the Kremlin – have resulted in it adopting many of its positions. Incidents like siding with ROC during the 2018 schism with the Church of Ukraine and attempting to prevent Montenegro's accession

to NATO in 2016 (Samorukov, 2019· Stronski & Himes, 2019), clearly demonstrate SOC's role as a political actor supporting Russian narratives whilst promoting Serbian nationalism in the regions that make up the "Serbian World" (which is apparently the Serbian version of the "Russian World") (Zweers et al, 2023· Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025).

Russian soft power projection is spearheaded and multiplied through disinformation and propaganda campaigns. Interestingly, the Russian version of reality is reproduced to a greater extent by Serbian – mainly pro-government – media outlets than by those owned by Russia itself – a clear byproduct of the aforementioned exploitation of Russia by the Serbian elites (Samorukov, 2023· Vuksanovic, 2023b· Zweers et al., 2023). Indicative of the success of Russian propaganda is the fact that the Serbian people consider Russia to be Serbia's largest economic partner even though for example in 2022 the EU represented 58.7% of Serbia's total trade and 32.9% of FDI, while Russia only 5.8% and 10.9% respectively (Juzova, 2024). In fact, Serbian public opinion has become so pro-Russian that it is convinced that Russia is falling victim to the West. At the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war in Serbia there were news reports stating that "the West is attacking Russia", at a time when 72% of Serbs believed that Russia was forced to start the war due to NATO's intentions to expand (Ilić & Stojilović, 2022· Bechev, 2023) and the country was the only one where pro-Russian demonstrations were held – which also happened after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Anastasakis, 2019). In this light, the widespread belief in "automatic" Russian influence in the region appears less a reflection of cultural or historical affinities and more a product of Moscow's successful propaganda machine – it's a narrative based more on fabricated perceptions than on material reality (Anastasakis, 2019). Nevertheless, these perceptions are not easily reversed by policy instruments (Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025). It is, therefore, evident that this third main axis of influence continues to produce tangible political benefits for Moscow in Serbia.

Serbia's "balancing act"

Recent developments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine clearly indicate both the depth of Russian influence over Serbian foreign policy and the increasing intensity – and success – of Serbia's balancing act between the West and Russia. While Serbia remains a candidate for EU membership, supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and has not recognized Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories (Zawadewicz, 2023), it has once again refrained from imposing sanctions on Moscow, just as it did after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Strikingly, despite delaying the adoption of EU foreign policy positions, Belgrade

readily signed a foreign policy coordination agreement with Russia in August 2023 (Bechev, 2023). However, to avoid the complete alienation of its Western allies, Belgrade supported UN resolutions condemning the Russian aggression and imposed sanctions against Belarus (Šćepanović, 2023· Bechev, 2023), while, according to leaked US intelligence information, it covertly supplied Ukraine with military equipment (Bieber, 2023· Zawadewicz, 2023). Notably, these actions did not provoke formal condemnation from Russian officials, something that demonstrates Russia's willingness to tolerate a degree of Serbian ambiguity to preserve its last significant Balkan partnership (Samorukov, 2024). Furthermore, since the war's outbreak, Serbia has suspended its participation in joint military exercises with the Russian army and the CSTO (Bechev, 2022), although it participated in military exercises with NATO states in 2023 (Zweers et al, 2023).

For this "neutral" stance, in fact, Belgrade was "rewarded" in 2023 by Moscow with the signing of an agreement for the supply of natural gas at a preferential price until 2025 (Bechev, 2022). In fact, Serbia was among few countries not required by Russia to pay in rubles (Samorukov, 2023). Belgrade is already aiming to extend this agreement by three more years (Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025), even as it contends with challenges posed by the new US sanctions against Russian equity in its energy sector (Gotev, 2025). At the same time, the pressure from western sanctions against Russia has yielded unexpected economic benefits for Serbia, since the country has become a preferred destination for Russian individuals and companies seeking to escape Russia's international isolation (Miholjcic-Ivkovic, 2024). In fact, Belgrade has allegedly provided Serbian citizenship, and consequently the right to travel to the EU, to many controversial Russian figures (Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025). In 2022 alone, Serbia experienced an increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) that exceeded the average FDI inflow of previous years by €500–600 million and the establishment of 1,020 Russian companies – which is a twelvefold increase from the previous year – precisely due to the massive influx of Russians into the country (Zweers et al, 2023).

Meanwhile, even against the backdrop of credible accusations of irregularities during Serbia's last elections (Bechev, 2024), apparent democratic backsliding (Fruscione & Ambrosetti, 2025) and ongoing domestic protests against corruption, not only did the EU not withdraw its support for Vucic's regime (Božović, 2025), but in early 2023 approved the largest European grant Serbia has ever received (intended for the reconstruction of the Belgrade-Niš railway line) (Bieber, 2023). At the same time, the West has been particularly supportive of Serbian positions regarding the Serbia-Kosovo negotiations in relation to the years before the Ukrainian war (Bieber, 2023), and did not even hesitate to impose sanctions

on Kosovo for the first time in history due to Albin Kurti's mismanagement of tensions in the Serb-majority north of the country (Dunai, 2023· Dunai et al., 2023).

Altogether, Serbia's balancing act allows it to extract political and economic benefits from both Russia and the West while avoiding full commitment to either. Of course, this strategic ambiguity directly serves vital Russian interests by preventing Serbia's full alignment with the EU, prolonging its European accession process and sustaining Moscow's presence in the region.

Conclusion

In the previous pages, an attempt was made to examine, within the limited extent of this paper, the basic parameters of Russia's foreign policy in the Balkans and particularly its delaying effect in Serbia's process of accession to the EU. By examining the Russian interests through the analytical lens of Hans Morgenthau's framework, we have established that the Balkans, although not situated in the first positions of Russia's list of priorities – since they further mainly secondary Russian interests – are still important for Moscow since they have a complementary role to its broader – and vital – interests, namely achieving great power status and disrupting NATO and EU enlargement. Despite been preoccupied for the last three years with its war in Ukraine Russia has never really backed down from its disruptive role in the Balkans showing "continuity rather than disruption" in its Balkan foreign policy (Zweers et al, 2023). Especially in the case of Serbia, two of Moscow's three main Balkan foreign policy pillars remain almost intact from the ongoing war, while the third although having received some major setbacks hasn't been crippled altogether. This, of course, results in maintaining Serbia's strategic balancing act between the West and Russia, satisfying a vital Russian interest – since without Belgrade Moscow's Balkan ambitions would have no foothold – and keeping Serbia from fully committing to its European perspective.

In particular, the combination of the EU's lacking approach to the Balkans and the Serbian predisposition to "sit in two chairs" constitutes a prime opportunity for the Kremlin to "fortify" its last footholds in the area by supporting – and then exploiting – its last Balkan ally. By embracing the "rights of the Serbian people", Moscow has made Belgrade its diplomatic hostage, ensuring that the Kosovo issue – which constitutes the main axis of its Balkan policy – remains unresolved, thus making its assistance and, therefore, its presence in the region necessary. In this sense, despite the often-used narrative of Russia's "return" to the Balkans,

"Russia has not returned to the region, as it never left" (Bechev, 2017). Having secured its presence, it uses a multitude of means and methods from diplomacy and energy to Pan-Slavism, Orthodoxy and the media to construct multi-layered relations with Serbia, in order to extend its influence in the country and promote its broader Balkan (and non-Balkan) interests. At the same time, Russian soft power has contributed significantly to bolstering the pro-Russian sentiments of the Serbian people resulting in many Serbs feeling very close to Russia – perhaps even closer than to the West – while important actors within Serbia – most notably the Serbian Orthodox Church – embrace Russian positions and act to promote Russian interests. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the Serbian elections, where even the most pro-Western Serbian politicians need to follow at least a moderate – if not openly pro-Russian – stance, otherwise risking alienating a significant portion of Serbian voters. The Russian approach, however, has its limitations, since it is characterized by utilitarianism and myopia, aiming more at obstructing Western initiatives than at promoting Russian alternatives – something that the Serbs are aware of, but downplay due to the short-term benefits they receive.

In fact, this "Russian card" is often instrumentalized as a – not so hidden – "ace up the sleeve" by the Serbian leadership to achieve, on the one hand, beneficial settlements abroad (such as in the accession negotiations with the EU which is afraid to put pressure on Serbia so it doesn't move closer to Russia) and, on the other hand, to prevail in the domestic political arena. This "non-aligned" behavior has become one of the core Serbian foreign policy tendencies, since it contributes to the promotion of Belgrade's – diverged between the West and Russia – interests, bringing in significant gains from all directions at minimal political cost. Consequently, however, the Russian influence that accompanies the "special Russo-Serbian relationship" is one of the most prominent reasons for the stalemate of Belgrade's accession negotiations. This doesn't mean that Serbia has or will ever transform to a "Little Russia", or a potential Russian "trojan horse" in EU's backyard. What it does mean, however, is that Brussels must adopt a more coherent, proactive, and forward-looking enlargement policy if it truly seeks to integrate Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkans into the European family. Until such a shift occurs, however, Russia will retain a significant foothold in Serbia prolonging Belgrade's EU accession process and, by extension, obstructing the entire region's path toward European integration.

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BALKAN COUNTRIES' GOALS AND CHALLENGES IN EU ENLARGEMENT

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Abstract: This study examines the membership aspirations of the Balkan countries in the context of the European Union (EU) enlargement movements and the problems they face in this process within the framework of constructivism. While constructivism focuses on the role of organizations in international relations, it also emphasizes that enlargement movements in the system are possible through the implementation of common norms, identities and values in the new member states. In this direction, a process that does not completely ignore material interests and prioritizes normative values is dominant. The EU's growth movements, which started with limited countries, increased the number of members over time and focused on enlargement movements. The organization, which became a global power in the following periods, stands out with its union-specific criteria and institutions and adopts strategies in the fields of law, politics and economy. From this point of view, the enlargement strategies realized by the EU have turned into an effort for the Western Balkan countries, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Albania, which gained their independence after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, to join the membership. The Western Balkan countries, which have achieved candidate country status as a result of reforms in political, economic and social areas, have also faced difficulties in the accession process due to various factors. These challenges include internal political and economic problems, bilateral disputes between countries and external factors such as the EU's enlargement fatigue. The difficulties encountered in this direction have led to setbacks in relations with the Union. However, in the ongoing process, the Western Balkan countries' efforts to adapt to EU norms in areas such as democratization, human rights and the rule of law have progressed positively. The Western Balkan countries wishing to join the Union put forward these norms, which must be fulfilled for accession, as a strategic goal and see them as positive gains. From this point of view, the aim of the study is to analyze the goals of the Western Balkan countries in terms of accession and the problems they face in the EU enlargement movements.

Keywords: European Union, enlargement movements, Western Balkan countries

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2000s, when the wars in the Balkans decreased, the European Union (EU) began to become an important actor in the region. The EU, which was not successful in the wars and conflicts that took place before the 2000s, launched various initiatives in the countries of the region in order to take an active role in the region after the Kosovo war and offered a membership perspective (Demirtaş, 2018: 179). However, while the EU has become the most influential power in the region, it is not only an economic integration project, but also a political structuring that unites around identity, norms and values.

For this reason, after the Cold War, the EU's enlargement steps turned into a normative value field that had the effect of transforming not only the institutions but also the identities and political cultures of the candidate countries. In this framework, EU membership in the Western Balkans represents European identity as well as economic development and democratization efforts.

In this article, the concept of the Western Balkans is used to represent the countries in the Balkans that are not yet EU members, and therefore includes Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania (Çağ, 2021: 2).

When we look at the EU's enlargement steps, while it has a very important place in the democratic transformation of the candidate countries, it is also important in the EU's foreign policy. For this reason, while the fifth enlargement movement included Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta, Malta, Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus in 2004 and Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the Union started to follow a more cautious policy in terms of becoming a member. This was due to internal problems as well as the democratic, economic and political situation of the countries wishing to become members. With the realization of the sixth enlargement with Croatia in 2013, there are currently five candidate countries and one potential candidate country in the Balkans region. The candidate countries are Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Kosovo is a potential candidate country (Presidency of the EU, 2024).

In this context, this study will analyze the goals of the Western Balkan countries in the EU accession process and the main problems encountered in this process within the framework of the theory of constructivism. Constructivism does not only evaluate international relations in terms of material interests and power, but also defines identity, norms and social construction processes. Accordingly, the Western Balkan countries' desire to integrate with the EU aims not only at

material outcomes but also at identity, norms and various social construction processes.

Western Balkan countries face various structural and social obstacles on the way to these goals. Regional ethnic crises, weak democratic institutions, a sense of social insecurity, identity conflicts and unclear messages in the EU's enlargement policy slow down or hinder this process. Accordingly, the main research question of the study is "How are the Western Balkan countries' aspirations for EU membership and the problems they face shaped in the context of identity and the search for harmonization with European norms?"

In this article, the EU enlargement movements will be analyzed not only in terms of institutional harmonization but also in the context of identity construction and normative value conformity; the EU relations of the Western Balkan countries will be analyzed in depth by using the conceptual tools offered by constructivism. Accordingly, in the first part, the founding process of the EU will be discussed and in the second part, the EU Enlargement Movements and enlargement policies in the Western Balkan countries will be evaluated. Then, the EU membership goals of the Western Balkan countries and the main problems encountered on the way to the EU will be analyzed.

The Founding Process of the EU

The establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, which served as the foundation of the EU, is considered to be the beginning of the process leading to the EU. One of the founding objectives of the ECSC was to secure the peace of the member states. Specifically, this aimed at preventing the wars between France and Germany and the danger this situation would pose to Europe. In fact, the main reason for the conflicts between France and Germany is the Iron, Steel and Mining sector. In this direction, European countries argued that conflicts would be prevented through cooperation and agreements to be made in the sector. For this reason, the ECSC was established in 1952 by six founding countries; France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Thanks to this cooperation established by Germany and the leading countries of Europe, the states were able to control each other. In this direction, since this process, which started with the ECSC, led to important results, the six founding countries decided to apply this cooperation to all economic areas. This decision led to the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Soytürk, 2020: 313-314).

The European Atomic Energy Community (EAEU-EURATOM) was established in 1957 in parallel with the EEC, representing the second European cooperation. The community, which was included in the Treaty of Rome, was established on the same day as the EEC (Erkmen, 2019: 141). Thanks to this community, it was aimed to ensure cooperation in nuclear energy fields among the member states. At the same time, within the framework of this community, the peaceful and safe use of nuclear energy was aimed (Soytürk, 2020: 314).

With the Fusion Treaty in 1965 (Merger Treaty), the three communities, the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, were gathered under a single roof council and named the European Communities (European Union, 2022).

While the number of member states was limited to six when the EEC was established, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland applied for membership in the following years. However, this process was prolonged because France used its veto power against the UK's membership twice in 1963 and 1967. Accordingly, the "First Enlargement Movement" took place in 1973 and these three countries became members of the Community. In 1981, the number of member states increased to twelve with the accession of Greece and Spain and Portugal in 1986 (European Union, 2022).

With the unification of Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the exit of Central and Eastern European countries from the Soviet sphere of influence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the international system has undergone changes in various ways. In order to respond to these changes, a summit was held in Maastricht in 1991. One of the most important decisions taken at this summit was the establishment of the European Union (EU). This would enable the community to respond more successfully to changes in the international system. In addition, this summit, also known as the Maastricht Treaty, decided to strengthen the ties of the member states through monetary union, the establishment of European citizenship and cooperation in the areas of security, internal affairs and common foreign policy (European Union, 2022).

EU's Enlargement Movements and Enlargement Policy in the Western Balkans

The political uncertainty in Europe following the end of the Cold War has been one of the main concerns of the EU during this period. While the number of EU members increased with the enlargement movements in the past years, the independence of Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union

led to various predictions within the EU. One of these was that the Eastern European countries would be able to join the Union after transforming their systems into a democratic structures. However, countries that wanted to become members had to meet certain standards in order to join the Union. For this reason, a summit was organized in Copenhagen in 1993, where the criteria to be met by the candidate countries were set. These criteria later came to be known as the "Copenhagen Criteria". These criteria are based on principles such as political stability, a functioning market economy and the adoption of the EU acquis (Soytürk, 2020: 315).

As a policy that constitutes an important part of enlargement, these criteria have been a mechanism that plays a role in the political, economic and democratic transformation of countries. Candidate countries were expected to have a free market economy, the rule of law and a state structure that respected human rights. Accordingly, Austria, Finland and Sweden, which practiced a policy of neutrality during the Cold War, became EU members in 1995 due to their economic and cultural relations with the Union (European Union, 2024).

Post-2000 Expansion Movements

In 2004, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta, and the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus became members of the European Union, marking the most comprehensive enlargement of the Union in history. With the accession of these ten countries, the number of EU members increased to twenty-five. This process, dubbed the fifth enlargement, is considered to be the most politically and historically influential enlargement of the Union. The transformation that started in Europe with the end of the Cold War turned into a process of integration with this enlargement. After half a century of wars and conflicts, the European continent achieved significant results in the field of stability and cooperation with this integration process (Özgöker & Batı, 2017: 31).

In 1995, Bulgaria and Romania, two Balkan countries that applied for membership to the EU, became EU members in 2007 after negotiations and the Accession Treaty. After the 2004 enlargement, the number of members of the Union reached twenty-seven. Bulgaria and Romania, which are important due to their strategic location, were under the pressure of Soviet influence for many years, but with the weakening of this influence over time, they were able to pave the way to EU membership (Karluk, 2011:110-111).

Croatia, which applied for candidacy in 2003, became a member of the EU in 2013 with the sixth enlargement after Slovenia lifted its veto on various issues. After Croatia, the EU became a 28-member[2] union (European Union, 2024).

Dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

The 1980s marked the beginning of radical changes for Central and Eastern European countries. Following the loss of power of the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc began to unravel and Yugoslavia was also affected by these developments. Firstly, the death of Tito and the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha was seen not only as the loss of two political leaders, but also as the loss of a unifying figure in their country. Secondly, the weakening of the Soviet system resulted in the overthrow of long-standing leaders such as Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania and Todor Zhivkov in Bulgaria, and new reform-minded governments came to power in these countries. In this process, all Balkan countries, except Greece and Yugoslavia, turned more towards the West and liberalization and privatization policies gained prominence. During this almost decade-long transformation period, the rising wave of nationalism in the Balkans became the main threat to regional peace (Erkmen, 2019: 142).

The emergence of political crises and conflicts caused by nationalist movements played a major role in the breakup of Yugoslavia. This disintegration first started with Slovenia in December 1990, followed by Macedonia in January 1991, then Croatia in June 1991 and Bosnia-Herzegovina in March 1992 (Alkan, 2007: 22-23). In 1993, Yugoslavia was replaced by the Federation of Serbia and Montenegro, but Montenegro declared its independence in 2006. For Kosovo, which declared its independence in 2008, the process was more challenging compared to other countries and various problems occurred between Serbia and Kosovo in this process (Bulut, 2017:39).

EU Enlargement Policy in the Western Balkans and Candidate Countries

In 1997, the European Union adopted a policy of "Regional Approach", which aims to bring the countries of the Western Balkans closer to the Union in the political and economic fields, while promoting the development of fundamental European values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights in the region. The approach is based on a policy of conditionality, which aims to ensure regional

2 With the formal withdrawal of the United Kingdom on January 31, 2020, the EU is now a 27-member Union (European Union, 2024).

security and stability by strengthening agreements and cooperation among the countries concerned. While the EU opened the path to membership for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after meeting the Copenhagen Criteria, it did not offer a direct membership perspective for the Western Balkan countries, instead focusing on their development through various incentives such as trade facilitation and financial support. Accordingly, it aimed to establish peace and economic development in the post-conflict region (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:32).

On December 14, 1995, the "Regional Approach Policy" adopted after the Dayton Agreement signed between Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia is considered to be the beginning of the EU's policies on the Western Balkans. With this policy, it was aimed to develop stability in the Western Balkan countries, to prevent the US from becoming the sole power in the region and to increase the sense of trust in the EU (Mujezinovic, 2007:175).

Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo) are included in this approach. In 1999, the European Commission adopted a vision for a more effective and forward-looking strategy for the Western Balkans, in line with the principles of the rule of law, the strengthening of democratic institutions and fundamental reforms such as the transition to a free market economy. Within the framework of this vision, it was stated that the countries that realized the necessary reforms could be offered the perspective of European Union membership. This process was called the "Stabilization and Association Process (SAP)" and it was envisaged that countries could sign a "Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA)" after completing the reform process (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:32).

The EU's concern for external security is at the center of the EU's expansion policy in the Balkans with various approaches. For this reason, it has tried to prevent crises and stabilize the region. Some of the efforts made in this direction are listed below:

Royaumont Process: Twenty-seven countries came together in Royaumont, France on December 13, 1995 and signed the Declaration on the 'Process of Stability and Good Neighborly Relations in South-Eastern Europe'. This declaration, which was also included in the Final Declaration of the Madrid Summit, was welcomed by the EU and thus constituted the first comprehensive approach of the EU in its Western Balkans policy. The objectives of the Royaumont Process were, firstly, the successful implementation of the Dayton Peace Treaty and, secondly, to contribute to the transformation of democracy and social society in the region (Kavalalı, 2005:152).

Joint Stability Pact: The Stability Pact, which aimed at the stability and economic development of the countries, was also considered as an attempt by the EU to make the countries of Southeast Europe adopt European values. Since the crises in the region affect the EU member states, the central importance of the Stability Pact is to ensure a peaceful environment. The objectives of the Stability Pact prioritize respect for human rights, the rule of democracy and the promotion of economic development. At the same time, the Stability Pact was seen as a step that would bring Yugoslavia closer to Europe. The political and economic elements offered to the countries of South East Europe also emphasize its importance in terms of offering different perspectives to the countries of the region for full membership to the EU in the future (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:33).

Regional Approach Policy: In the run-up to the Rome Conference on the realization of the Dayton Peace Treaty held on 15-16 February 1996, upon the invitation of the Council, the Commission prepared a detailed report on the Western Balkan countries on 14 February 1996 and proposed a new policy called 'Regional Approach' (Kavalalı, 2005:145). Within the scope of the "Regional Approach", economic aid, trade cooperation, general criteria and country-specific conditions were determined, including the Western Balkan countries that did not have an association relationship with the EU. The criteria that the Western Balkan countries are asked to comply with are; ensuring the return of refugees, readmission of citizens who are fugitives within the EU, maintaining the Dayton Peace Treaty, respect for minority and human rights. The EU has stated that it will impose some sanctions such as suspending trade relations, stopping aid and postponing the agreements put forward when it sees that situations that do not comply with these criteria continue (Altun, 2013:3).

Thessaloniki Summit: This summit, which was prepared by the EU Commission and included concessions for the Western Balkans, took place in Thessaloniki, Greece on June 21, 2003. The summit will include

- Technical assistance to the Western Balkan countries,

-Western Balkan countries to prepare and implement separate "Action Plans" and the Commission to monitor these plans through annual reports,

- Similar to the structure established in the candidate countries, the single framework decisions include the participation of the Western Balkan countries in the Community programs and agencies, as well as the Commission's proposals taking into account the use of CARDS Program resources (Kavalalı, 2005:148).

In line with these decisions, the EU aims to support the Western Balkan countries in terms of economic and technical support and aims for them to become members of the EU.

South East Europe 2020 Strategy: The strategy for the economic and social development of the South Eastern European countries envisages activities such as increasing national income per capita, foreign investment and welfare. The South East Europe 2020 Strategy aims to come together with the governments of the region to formulate national action plans and to ensure regional integration in this direction (Özgöker & Batı, 2017:34).

Candidate Countries

Following the accession of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia to the EU, the Union turned its enlargement efforts to the Western Balkans. In this context, North Macedonia (2005), Montenegro (2010), Serbia (2012), Albania (2014) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2022) gained candidate country status. Kosovo became a potential candidate country (2008) (European Union, 2024).

Membership Goals of the Western Balkan Countries and Obstacles

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the EU adopted various strategies for the realization of stability and democratic transformation in the region by extending its membership perspective to the Western Balkans region, which it had envisaged for Central and Eastern European countries. In line with the enlargement movements carried out in this context, becoming a member of the Union is seen as an important goal for the Western Balkan countries, covering not only economic integration but also democratization, rule of law, security and integration with the European identity. Although the processes leading to membership vary from country to country, the existence of common regional efforts is very important for the Balkan region.

The EU has become the main political actor in the Western Balkans, especially since the early 2000s. With the launch of the Stabilization Pact and the Association Process in the context of the Kosovo War in 1999, the EU has managed to go beyond economic work in the region. From providing police forces, judges and prosecutors in Kosovo to peacekeeping and peacemaking in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from supporting political reforms in North Macedonia to pushing regional governments to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the EU has played an active role in the region (Bıeber, 2013:1).

Serbia

It has been argued that Serbia remains "one of the most reluctant Europeanizers, consistently understudied and under-theorized in the Europeanization literature" (Subotić, 2010). Upon examination, the EU and Serbia have had a difficult relationship. For many years, tensions centered in particular on Serbia's non-cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). More recently, however, the interaction between Europe and Serbia has been predominantly shaped by the deep differences that emerged between Serbia and the EU following Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. This led to a series of confrontations between Belgrade and the EU. However, the situation started to improve significantly from 2011 onwards. Under the auspices of the EU's External Action Service, a dialogue process between Belgrade and Pristina started on March 8, 2011. In the first phase of the talks, the primary focus is on reaching agreements on three key objectives: "improving people's lives, achieving better cooperation in the Balkans and bringing the region closer to the EU" (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015: 2).

In essence, relations with the EU began when the first democratic coalition government, formed after Milosevic refused to accept the results of the 2000 elections, set its primary goal full membership in the EU, and Serbia became a potential candidate country following the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). However, in the following period, it was stated that the process would be suspended due to the failure to surrender the war criminals and send them to The Hague, and the process was interrupted. However, in 2007, Serbia cooperated with the International Court to hand over the criminals responsible for the Srebrenica massacre (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 220). In this direction, an important step was taken towards EU membership. However, in this process, Serbia was not granted candidate status due to its failure to recognize Kosovo's independence, and this status was obtained only on March 1, 2012 (Turan, 2020: 57).

When we look at Serbia's goals on the path to EU membership, the first thing we see is economic aid. Especially as Serbia struggled to recover from the impact of the international crisis, the EU was seen as the key to national economic growth. In this context, the current political elites have made statements that their goal is to enter the EU and in this context to upgrade the economic system. Moreover, Serbian citizens' priorities for EU membership include a better future, welfare policies and employability (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015: 19). Thus, Serbia's EU membership is seen as a way to increase its legitimacy in the international arena and improve its relations with Western countries. In addition, the country

sees economic support as its main objective and focuses on investment and development projects.

When we look at the obstacles Serbia faces towards EU membership, the first one is the public administration reform. In this context, the recommendations of the EU Commission in previous years have not been implemented. Other important obstacles include limited progress on judiciary and fundamental rights. This is particularly the case in constitutional amendments and adoption of by-laws. Another important obstacle is Serbia's lack of progress in the area of freedom of expression. The independence of the electronic media (REM) regulator, strengthening the protection and safety of journalists, and ensuring transparent and fair co-financing for media content serving the public interest are all priorities for the EU. Serbia's lack of progress in this area means that freedom of expression remains an obstacle. Another important obstacle is the fight against organized crime. Serbia has made limited progress on this issue and has therefore been invited by the authorities to actively cooperate with CEPOL, Eurojust, Europol and INTERPOL, especially in the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime groups (European Commission, 2024).

Montenegro

One of the first EU-supported state-building projects in the Western Balkans, the experiment of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, saw a significant majority of Montenegrin citizens (around 55%) vote in favor of independence in a referendum in May 2006, thus ending the precarious state-like entity. Some celebrated this event as a success of the EU's soft power, mainly due to the peaceful and democratic separation of the two constituent republics of the common state. Between 2001 and 2006, EU policy towards Serbia and Montenegro clearly favored the preservation of a common state for the two republics. The EU demanded the re-establishment of the international legal sovereignty of Serbia and Montenegro as a single subject under international law and the continuation of a layer of common institutions and policies. According to the EU representatives' own statements, regional stability and the EU's interests there are most frequently cited as drivers of the EU's involvement in the constitutional impasse between Serbia and Montenegro. The reference to the EU's security concerns is important in this context. Intensely engaged politically, financially and militarily in the stabilization and consolidation of BiH and Kosovo, the EU has been careful not to disturb the fragile peace achieved in the Balkans in the late 1990s. In the fall of 2004, the EU agreed to conduct separate 'double-track' trade negotiations with the two republics within the framework of negotiations on a single Stabilization

and Association Agreement (SAA) with the State Union. Second, when Montenegro announced its intention to hold a referendum on independence, a right enshrined in the Belgrade Agreement, the EU worked with political parties in the government and the opposition to find a consensus on the conditions under which a positive vote would be considered legitimate and give the republic international recognition. Following the referendum, the EU immediately accepted the result and called on its member states to recognize the new state on the map of Europe (Noutcheva, 2009: 5).

After Montenegro's independence in 2006, Montenegro has been working on regional and environmental reforms to improve its relations with the European Union and has been close to enlargement movements. In line with these developments, the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed with Montenegro in 2007 and Montenegro applied for membership in 2008. In 2010, the EU Commission continued to focus on the areas of justice, freedom and security for Montenegro in the accession process. Following the commission report prepared in 2010, Montenegro's status as a candidate country was approved in 2010 and the negotiation process officially started in 2012 and it was stated that the criteria in chapters 23 and 24 were pioneering in this regard. In the progress report, 7 chapters were opened for negotiations with an emphasis on reforms. The 2015 NATO membership invitation was an important step for Montenegro. When 2016 was analyzed, it was stated that progress in issues such as justice and home affairs, democracy was positive, but since there was not enough improvement in the economy, some recommendations were made in this regard (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 221).

When analyzed in this context, within the scope of the policies implemented by the EU in Montenegro, "state building and legitimacy tool" comes first among the EU membership objectives of Montenegro. In the new state built after independence, the EU membership request is a part of gaining legitimacy in the international system. At the same time, the reforms to be carried out in the country on the way to membership are very important both in terms of securing foreign support and attracting investment. Therefore, the membership goal functions as a foreign policy strategy.

However, when we make a general evaluation, the inadequacy of the political system in terms of governance, limited progress on corruption, waiting for improvements in the fight against criminal organizations and limited progress in the field of economic criteria can be listed as the obstacles faced by Montenegro in terms of EU membership within the framework of the "2024 Montenegro Report" (European Commission, 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sources indicate that the EU has been involved in both helping post-conflict countries to reconstruct and attempting to build future EU member states. While these two policies are, at least in name, contained in the Stabilization and Association process, the EU has not had a single policy towards the region, but rather a number of different policies carried out by various EU institutions and ad hoc bodies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the EU is present in four different forms: EU presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the peacekeeping operation EUFOR (Operation Althea), the EU Police Mission (EUPM), the EU Special Representative (until 2011 under the Office of the High Representative) and the Commission Delegation (since 2011 the EU Delegation under the External Action Service). Thus, apart from creating a single policy out of institutions and policies, the EU's efforts in the Western Balkans are based on a fundamental assumption: that the EU can successfully bring about change through conditionality, transforming countries into stable democracies with a functioning rule of law and the ability to become EU member states. This process is understood to be largely twofold. First, transforming institutions and adopting EU-compatible legislation, and second, socializing elites through EU conditionality. These conditions range from transforming state structures in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to addressing the effects of mass violence in post-war regions, including Croatia and Serbia, and transforming governance across the region (Bıeber, 2013:2).

Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a complex state structure within the context of different ethnicities. The EU's main objective in this region, where fragility is particularly high, is to increase the functioning of state institutions and strengthen the concept of democracy, while at the same time making it possible to fulfill the criteria that will enable the country to join the Union. Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has made significant progress after its independence, has made progress in many areas such as free market economy, civil society organizations and democratization. However, the dual structure called Bosniak-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska within the scope of the Dayton Model made it difficult to ensure stability in the country and hindered the EU process. In the following periods, negotiations were initiated in 2005 within the scope of the ups and downs and the SAA was signed in 2008. However, the planned reforms were suspended due to the political crises in the country. In 2012, the High Dialogue on the accession process was initiated with Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the country could not apply for membership due to the ECtHR decision due to the lack of improvements in the legal field (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 224).

Signed in 2008, the Stabilization and Association Agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU entered into force on June 1, 2015. This removed an important obstacle on Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to membership and the country applied for membership to the EU on February 15, 2016. The 2019 Enlargement Strategy Paper stated that it was premature to declare the country's candidacy and presented an overarching roadmap for candidacy. This roadmap states that the start of negotiations will depend on progress on the rule of law, democracy, public administration and fundamental rights. In the following period, at the EU Summit of Heads of State and Government on 15 December 2022, it was decided to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina the status of candidate country (European Union, 2024).

With this process, one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership goals is to ensure the integrity of the state and maintain internal stability. In addition to economic and political goals, the goal of ensuring the integrity of the state is of great importance. In addition, EU membership opens up new areas for the rule of law, democratization and reforms within the framework of the proposed norms. In this respect, membership goals are of strategic importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The poor functioning of the judicial system is one of the main obstacles to membership. Commission officials argue that the rights of citizens and the fight against corruption should be among the priorities of the judicial system. The fight against corruption is not seen as fully in line with European standards. Another obstacle is freedom of expression. The EU argues that there has been no progress in guaranteeing freedom of expression and media freedom and the protection of journalists. Another obstacle Bosnia and Herzegovina faces on the path to membership is the limited availability of a functioning market economy. Bosnia and Herzegovina is at an early stage of preparation and has made limited progress. In 2023, economic growth slowed to around 1.6%, mainly reflecting the deteriorating international environment (European Commission, 2024).

Overall, the country's ethnic divisions, the external dependence of reform processes and the lack of fully functioning institutions pose various obstacles to membership. In this context, the normative values of the EU have a limited and superficial impact and reforms are not fully implemented.

North Macedonia

Although the Republic of North Macedonia was recognized by many countries after it declared its independence in 1991, the recognition was not fully achieved

due to the name problem put forward by Greece, and it was referred to as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). On the other hand, in this process, crises occurred between Albanians and Macedonians, who have a large minority population in the country. Therefore, the country, which faced a difficult process, tried to stabilize the insecurity environment by cooperating with the EU and NATO (Armişen &Tatar, 2022: 222).

In 1999, within the scope of the Stabilization and Association Process initiated by the EU, the membership of the Western Balkan countries to the Union was aimed and various political and economic strategies were put forward to ensure stability in the region. In this direction, bilateral relations between Macedonia and the EU were tried to be developed. Macedonia, which joined the Stabilization and Association Process in 2000, completed the negotiations in 2001. The Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force on April 1, 2004 (Güner, 2020:11).

At the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, Macedonia was defined by the EU as a potential candidate country together with other Balkan countries. Within this framework, Macedonia submitted its membership application to the EU on March 22, 2004. In 2005, North Macedonia's candidate status was accepted for the first time in the Balkans. Despite obtaining candidate status, the country could not start accession negotiations with the EU for many years due to the name dispute with Greece. Greece objected to the country's name on the grounds that it "claimed rights over the Macedonia Region in the north of its own country" and therefore blocked both the country's EU and NATO membership. As a result, Greece and North Macedonia agreed on June 12, 2018 to change the name of the country to the "Republic of North Macedonia". On February 12, 2019, following the entry into force of the Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia notified the EU of the country's new name. Following the Prespa Agreement, the EU General Affairs Council decided to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia on March 25, 2020. As of 2022, North Macedonia has been benefiting from visa liberalization since 2009. The country's NATO membership was realized on March 27, 2020 (European Union, 2024).

So what are North Macedonia's goals for EU membership?

Dr. Daskalovski from Kliment Ohridski University, evaluated this question within the framework of EU conditionality and argued that "the EU membership goal acts as a catalyst for political, economic reforms in the Western Balkans and Macedonia in particular, and that the EU is a transformative external factor for Macedonia. In this context, EU membership for North Macedonia encompasses

various factors such as the rule of law, conflict resolution, the rise of liberal democracy, good governance, human rights, and structural development in norms and values (Keçeci, 2017:170).

Although it seems that there is no obstacle to join the EU with the Prespa Agreement, this intervention is an important obstacle for North Macedonia, which faced Bulgaria's intervention in 2020. Bulgaria claims that the Macedonian language and identity belong to "the Bulgarian people who lived in North Macedonia centuries ago" (Armişen &Tatar, 2022: 222). Another obstacle facing North Macedonia on the road to membership is the fight against corruption. The EU Commission Reports state that the country has made no progress in the fight against corruption. Corruption remains widespread in many areas and is a serious concern. At the same time, limited media freedom and institutional weakness are other obstacles the country faces on the path to membership (European Commission, 2024).

Albania

After the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s, Albania tried to improve its relations with the EU in order to ensure democracy and reforms in the country, and in this context, Albania tried to improve its relations with Italy and Greece. However, this process was not easy due to the weakness of the democratic regime, the existence of illegal criminal organizations and the corruption of the justice system. In 1998, when a popular revolt broke out due to economic and political reasons, the Stabilization and Association Process was initiated for the realization of EU membership for the development and stabilization of the region, and economic and political integration was tried to be achieved through the Pre-Accession Assistance Fund (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 223).

At the June 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, Albania was declared a potential candidate country and an important step was taken on the road to negotiations. With the entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU on April 1, 2009, Albania applied for membership to the EU on April 24, 2009. Albania also became a member of NATO on April 1, 2009. However, due to democratic, political and economic conditions, it took until June 27, 2014 for the country to obtain official candidate status. In light of Albania's progress in the following years, in 2018 the EU Commission recommended that accession negotiations could start. However, at the EU General Affairs Council (GAC) on June 26, 2018, it was suggested that negotiations with Albania could start in June 2019, subject to certain conditions being met. Following various initiatives during this period, on March 25, 2020, the EU decided to open accession negotiations with

Albania. Accordingly, the Intergovernmental Conference to launch accession negotiations was held in 2022 and the screening process was initiated for Albania (European Union, 2024).

In the EU accession process, Albania adopts membership goals in various areas such as the rule of law, new reforms in institutional areas, and development in social areas. Moreover, the adoption of the EU acquis in the country is seen as a goal not only from a technical point of view but also in terms of ensuring political legitimacy. However, during the reporting period, Albania faced various obstacles to membership in areas such as freedom of expression, high market concentration, political reforms, lack of transparency of financing sources and pressure on the media (European Commission, 2024). Accordingly, Albania still considers EU membership as a strategic goal, even though it may jeopardize the sustainability of the country's reforms towards membership.

Kosovo

Kosovo, which declared its independence in 2008, is still experiencing problems as some countries still do not recognize it. In addition to economic and political problems, the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence by some EU countries creates difficulties in Kosovo's EU relations. Because within the scope of EU membership, Kosovo must be recognized by all member states. On the other hand, the existence of crises in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia is one of the priority areas where relations need to be improved for the EU membership process. In this context, Kosovo was included in the Stabilization and Association Process in 2016 for Kosovo's accession to the EU and for the realization of the desired reforms (Armişen & Tatar, 2022: 225).

Article 2 of the TEU states that "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities". Article 2 of the TEU forms the basis of the Copenhagen Criteria, which translate the values and principles contained in the TEU into more concrete criteria that must be met for a state to be ready to join the EU. These conditions are known as the Copenhagen criteria and include the existence of a stable democracy, a well-functioning rule of law, a functioning market economy and the adoption of all EU legislation (Fetahu, 2023:7).

So, what are the necessary procedures for Kosovo's EU membership?

First of all, Kosovo's application for membership should be included in the EU Council agenda after its submission. However, at this point, the approval of

the representatives of all member states is required. This requires a consensus among all member states. However, the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus, Spain, Romania, Slovakia and Greece do not recognize Kosovo's independence (European Union, 2024). Accordingly, the obstacles Kosovo faces in the international arena and the slow implementation of structural reforms make it unlikely that Kosovo will start membership talks in the near future (Fetahu, 2023:9).

When we look at the reasons for not recognizing these five countries, there are various reasons put forward by the countries. Greece's aim to support the Albanian minority in the country and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus, the idea that the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus will set an example for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Romania and Spain's defense that those who are minorities in other states may demand the same right, and Slovakia's non-recognition oppose Kosovo's membership with the idea that it may have negative repercussions on the independence of other countries (Ayhan, 2008:124).

According to the European Commission's Kosovo 2024 Report, the Commission firstly emphasized that efforts should continue to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The Commission also emphasizes the necessity of this issue in the context of the Western Balkans, Reform and Growth Facility. From 1 January 2024, Kosovo passport holders will enjoy visa-free travel to the EU, while Kosovo has actively participated in the implementation of the four pillars of the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans: (i) gradual integration into the European Union's single market; (ii) regional economic integration; (iii) fundamental reforms; and (iv) strengthened financial support. Accordingly, on October 9, Kosovo adopted the Reform Agenda envisaged under the Reform and Growth Facility (Growth Plan for the Western Balkans). However, the Commission still expects Kosovo to make progress in areas such as good governance, public financial management, green and digital transition, fundamental rights and rule of law (European Commission, 2024).

In conclusion, while Kosovo's accession depends in particular on the continuation of positive relations with Serbia, the fact that the country is not recognized by the five member states is one of the key issues hindering the process. Kosovo believes that EU membership would provide positive support in legal, economic and political areas. In this context, Kosovo has to maintain positive relations with both Serbia and the member states.

Conclusion

In line with the enlargement movements of the European Union, especially the promotion of democracy, stability and prosperity has become an important policy in the post-Cold War period in terms of spreading it across the European continent. Within the scope of this policy, the Western Balkan countries have seen EU membership not only as a foreign policy tool but also as a goal for the realization of domestic reforms. In this context, the central objectives of the Western Balkan countries are the rule of law, the strengthening of democratic institutions, the promotion of economic development and the desire for integration with European political values. In addition, ethnic and border crises in the region are of strategic importance for ensuring a culture of peace and prosperity through EU membership.

The Western Balkan countries' aspirations for EU membership represent a multilayered process that includes political and economic interests as well as norms and values. The countries in the region are taking various steps towards harmonization with European norms, working towards domestic structural reforms on the one hand and aiming to be included in European norms and values on the other. From this point of view, EU membership should be considered as a process of reconstruction of normative values as well as an external integration process for the Western Balkan countries.

However, various structural and political problems are encountered on the way to achieving these goals. Inadequacies in the areas such as the rule of law, the slow democratization process, the fight against corruption and restrictions on freedom of expression in the countries of the region constitute obstacles to adapting to the values put forward by the EU. At the same time, the ongoing ethnic identity problems in the region leading to conflicting crises and the rise of issues such as border security make the goal of integration with the European identity difficult. These problems lead to normative integration remaining in discourse and EU values being evaluated only in technical areas. When we consider external factors, the EU's reluctance to expand in recent years comes to the fore. Especially after the expansion movement between 2004 and 2007, the "expansion fatigue" put forward is considered a serious problem in Europe (Oğuz, 2012:61). The policies of some EU member states shaped within the framework of their national interests are carrying the expansion process to a political ground. This situation harms the fact that the expansion movements are not technical and are a predictable process. In addition, progress towards membership without resolving bilateral disputes between some Western Balkan countries, such as Kosovo and Serbia, has been seen as a difficult process.

Despite these problems, the EU membership goal continues to be the most important foreign policy tool for the Western Balkan countries. Because the EU is seen as a structure that provides security, economic development and legitimacy in the global system for the countries in the region. However, the continuity and success of the membership process does not only depend on the reforms of the candidate countries, but also on the EU's more active, stable and promising framework for its expansion movements. On the other hand, the candidate countries should implement their reforms not only for the purpose of becoming members, but also as transformations that will ensure social welfare.

In conclusion, when we evaluate, the integration process of the Western Balkan countries with the EU will be achieved through the unity of norms, values and political harmony. The success of the membership process is possible with the construction of mutual European norms and values, together with technical inputs. In this context, it is of great importance that the EU's expansion strategy is shaped within an inclusive and principled framework, and that the Western Balkan countries implement stability and applicable reforms in their democratic transformation processes.

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THE WESTERN BALKANS AS A BUFFER ZONE: MIGRATION, EU INTEGRATION, AND GEOPOLITICAL CALCULATIONS

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Abstract: The Western Balkans occupy a key geopolitical position between the European Union and major migration routes from the Middle East and Africa. As a region aspiring to European integration, it faces challenges posed by EU migration policies, which often treat the Balkans as a buffer zone for controlling migrant inflows. This paper will analyze whether the EU enlargement policy is influenced by a strategy of keeping the Balkans outside its borders to more effectively manage migration pressures.

The paper will examine key factors shaping this dynamic, including security policies, readmission agreements, and the treatment of migrants in the Balkans. It will explore the role of Frontex, bilateral agreements between the EU and Balkan states, and pressures from EU member states that oppose further enlargement. Special attention will be given to the region's economic and political instability, which further complicates the European integration process and raises the question of whether the EU deliberately delays the accession of the Western Balkans to maintain it as a buffer zone.Through an analysis of migration policies, regional initiatives, and EU relations with Western Balkan countries, this paper will explore the potential balance between European integration and migration strategies. It concludes that the EU's current approach to the Balkans reflects a broader geopolitical interest—migration control without commitment to an accelerated integration process.

Keywords: EU enlargement policy, migration control, European integration

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Introduction

The Western Balkans, a region comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, occupies a strategically significant space between the European Union (EU) and the primary migration routes originating from the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. This positioning makes the region a crucial geopolitical crossroads, linking volatile conflict zones and economically fragile states with the wealth and stability of the EU. Although all countries in the Western Balkans are formally engaged in various stages of the EU integration process, their accession journeys have been marked by considerable stagnation, complex conditionalities, and growing skepticism from both EU institutions and member states. The accession process has been slowed by internal political challenges within the candidate countries, concerns over the rule of law, corruption, and unresolved bilateral disputes, which together contribute to a prolonged and uncertain path to full membership.

In recent years, the region has become increasingly associated with the EU's efforts to externalize its migration policies, effectively positioning the Western Balkans as a buffer zone for managing migration flows. This term refers to the role played by these non-EU countries in hosting migrants, enforcing stringent border controls, and cooperating in readmission agreements, often while not receiving the full political or economic benefits of EU membership. The concept of "buffer zone" highlights the asymmetric relationship where Western Balkan countries serve as frontline controllers of migration pressure toward the EU, bearing disproportionate burdens without commensurate rewards. This dynamic raises critical questions about the nature of EU enlargement policy and whether it has been subordinated to broader geopolitical objectives centered on migration control rather than genuine integration.

The 2015–2016 refugee crisis starkly exposed the EU's vulnerabilities in managing sudden and large-scale migration flows, intensifying its reliance on third countries as partners in controlling borders and curbing irregular migration. In response, EU agencies such as Frontex significantly expanded their operational presence in the Balkans, alongside the signing of numerous bilateral and regional agreements designed to strengthen border surveillance and facilitate the readmission of migrants. However, these practical cooperation measures have not been matched by equivalent progress in political integration or accession negotiations. The simultaneous lack of substantial advancement in EU enlargement has fueled concerns that the Western Balkans' role as a migration buffer may be more than a temporary arrangement, potentially becoming a structural feature of EU external policy.

This paper argues that the European Union strategically delays the integration of the Western Balkans to preserve the region's function as a geopolitical buffer zone for migration management. Through a comprehensive analysis of migration policies, the expanding role of Frontex, the impact of bilateral readmission agreements, and the enduring stagnation in the EU enlargement process, this study explores the dual strategy employed by the EU: managing migration through containment mechanisms while withholding the political and institutional commitment that full membership entails. Such a strategy not only reflects the EU's cautious approach to enlargement but also highlights the intersection of migration control and geopolitical considerations shaping the future of the Western Balkans. This tension creates a complex environment where migration pressures are managed at the cost of deepening political uncertainty and social instability in a region caught between aspiration and exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the role of the Western Balkans in the European Union's migration strategy, it is necessary to examine several theoretical concepts that underpin this geopolitical arrangement. The primary frameworks include the theory of externalization, buffer zone politics, and Europeanization without accession. Together, these concepts explain how the EU manages migration and security while delaying integration processes.

Externalization of Migration Policy

The concept of externalization refers to the EU's strategy of managing migration by shifting responsibilities to third countries, often outside its legal territory and jurisdiction. As Lavenex (2018) explains, "facing the impossibility of fixing the internal system of refugee admission, the lion's share of EU recent initiatives reinforce external migration policies towards countries of origin and transit for asylum seekers" (Lavenex, 2018: 1206).

In the Western Balkans, this is manifested through the deployment of Frontex, the signing of readmission agreements, and the establishment of migration management centers supported by EU funds. These arrangements blur the line between cooperation and dependency.

The Buffer Zone Concept

The term "buffer zone" is used in geopolitical literature to describe territories that serve as protective belts between great powers or blocs. In the EU context,

the Western Balkans are viewed as a migration containment belt between the EU and unstable neighboring regions.

"Is Serbia a transit country or slowly becoming a buffer zone for the EU's illegal push-back policy and overall goal to reduce migration to its territory" (Stiftung, 2025)?

"In practice, the European externalisation project meant creating a buffer zone in southern Mediterranean states. This took place via migration deals aimed at improving partner countries' border management and migrant interception abilities" (Martini & Magerisi, 2025).

The concept implies that the region absorbs both migrants and political instability, thereby protecting core EU states from potential crises. This instrumentalization calls into question the sincerity of the EU's enlargement narrative.

Europeanization Without Accession

While Europeanization traditionally assumes that countries internalize EU norms on their path to membership, the Western Balkans demonstrate a different pattern: compliance without integration.

"For the Western Balkans, Turkey and potentially the countries of the Eastern Partnership, the perspective of EU accession has become less credible and the domestic adaptation costs have risen" (Matlak et al., 2018: 8).

"Whereas conditionality is still the dominant mechanism of Europeanization in the (potential) candidate countries, it is less likely to be effective." (Matlak et al., 2018: 11).

This hybrid condition has been described as a form of governance without membership, where the EU exercises influence through conditionality and funding but postpones institutional inclusion.

Geopolitical Instrumentalism and Migration

The intersection of enlargement and migration control can also be interpreted through the lens of geopolitical instrumentalism, where migration is not only a humanitarian issue but a tool of foreign policy.

"This frequently asymmetric brand of coercion—i.e., coercive engineered migration (CEM)—has been attempted at least seventy-five times since the advent of the 1951 Refugee Convention alone; that is at least one per year on average" (Greenhil, 2016: 24).

The Western Balkans, therefore, become a space where both migration and enlargement strategies are subordinated to broader security and geopolitical goals.

This theoretical framework enables a deeper understanding of how the EU's migration governance intersects with its enlargement policy. By treating the Western Balkans as a functional borderland, the EU enforces its migration agenda while maintaining strategic ambiguity about full membership. The next section will apply this framework to analyze key mechanisms and case studies that illustrate how this dynamic plays out in practice.

Empirical Analysis: Mechanisms of Migration Governance in the Western Balkans

The implementation of EU migration policy in the Western Balkans reveals a deliberate effort to externalize border control, outsource asylum responsibilities, and institutionalize the region's function as a containment space. The following mechanisms illustrate how this strategy operates in practice.

Deployment of Frontex and Security Externalization

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has expanded its operational reach beyond the EU's borders, signing status agreements with multiple Western Balkan states. These agreements enable joint border patrols and data sharing, effectively integrating Balkan states into the EU's border regime without granting them any institutional rights or obligations of membership.

"Frontex has significantly expanded its operations in the Western Balkans, including the deployment of personnel and equipment in non-EU countries, raising concerns about potential legal and human rights implications" (Frontex, 2025).

Frontex has signed operational agreements with Albania (2019), Montenegro (2020), and Serbia (2021), and is present on their borders with North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This allows the EU to control migratory flows before migrants reach EU territory, reinforcing the externalization logic.

Readmission Agreements and Migrant Containment

Western Balkan countries have signed readmission agreements both with the EU and individual member states, which enable the return of migrants who have transited through the region. These agreements, in practice, shift the burden of asylum processing and migrant accommodation onto third countries.

"Despite being framed as reciprocal arrangements, EU readmission agreements often impose disproportionate obligations on third countries, leading to an imbalance in responsibilities and benefits" (MEI, 2025).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, in particular, has become a de facto holding zone for migrants unable to move forward due to tightened EU border controls and the lack of proper asylum infrastructure.

Informal Camps and Human Rights Concerns

The buffer zone role is further visible in the substandard living conditions in informal or semi-formal migrant camps, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Camps such as Lipa and Bira in the Una-Sana Canton have drawn international criticism for lacking basic services and protection.

"Hundreds of migrants and asylum-seekers remain stranded in northwest Bosnia and Herzegovina without an end in sight as politicians at all levels failed to agree their relocation to dignified and humane facilities in other parts of the country" (Statewatch, 2025).

This humanitarian crisis is not merely a result of institutional weakness, but a deliberate policy outcome, where EU support is channeled toward containment infrastructure rather than integration or relocation mechanisms.

EU Funding and Conditionality

Between 2015 and 2023, the EU allocated over €700 million to the Western Balkans for migration-related projects through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) and EU Trust Fund for Africa. However, much of this funding is directed toward border management, surveillance equipment, and detention centers rather than long-term integration.

"The EU has responded to unwanted arrivals with ever-stricter security measures, an approach that has both led to increased human rights violations and failed to stem the migratory tide." (Carneige, 2025).

Thus, EU assistance reproduces the logic of temporary containment, sustaining the role of the region as a buffer without inclusion.

These mechanisms—Frontex deployment, readmission deals, substandard asylum conditions, and securitized EU aid—form a coherent system that aligns with the concept of the Western Balkans as a migration buffer zone. The region

absorbs migratory pressures while the EU maintains geopolitical leverage without making institutional commitments.

The Politics of Enlargement Delay

Despite the rhetorical commitment to EU enlargement, the accession process for the Western Balkans has stagnated. While official narratives stress the need for reforms, rule of law, and regional cooperation, migration management and security concerns have increasingly influenced the EU's political stance. This section explores how migration-related conditionality, enlargement fatigue, and internal EU divisions contribute to the region's liminal status.

Enlargement Fatigue and Internal EU Divisions

Since the 2004–2007 enlargements, several EU member states have shown growing reluctance to admit new members, particularly from the Western Balkans. This reluctance is often framed in terms of "enlargement fatigue," driven by fears of political instability, corruption, and poor governance in candidate countries.

"The influence of domestic politics in the member states at key moments of the enlargement process has become increasingly evident, with national interests often taking precedence over collective EU commitments" (EPC, 2025).

France and the Netherlands, for example, have repeatedly delayed the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, citing concerns about migration flows and border security.

Migration as a Justification for Delay

Security and migration have become de facto criteria for enlargement, even though they are not formally listed in the Copenhagen criteria. The EU has increasingly framed Western Balkan states as unreliable partners in migration control, using this perception to delay membership negotiations.

"The EU's externalisation of migration and border management to the Western Balkans stands in sharp contrast with its long-standing goal of a stabilisation of the region pursued in the framework of the EU's enlargement process." (Liperi, 2019)

For example, the European Commission's 2022 Enlargement Package emphasized the need for "effective border management and migrant registration systems" in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia as prerequisites for progress toward candidate status.

Strategic Ambiguity and Buffer Logic

The EU's ambiguous stance toward enlargement reflects a broader geopolitical logic: maintaining strategic influence without institutional commitment. While offering financial assistance and diplomatic engagement, the EU continues to treat the region as a permanent periphery, essential for migration control and regional stability, but not fit for full membership.

"The EU considers itself involved, against its will, in a traditional geopolitical game of influence in a European periphery where its competitors allegedly strive to redefine the rules of the game, to the disadvantage of the Western Balkan region and the EU." (Bieber & Tzifakis, The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard?, 2019).

This "strategic ambiguity" allows the EU to benefit from the region's migration management role without confronting the political costs of enlargement.

The Western Balkans' status as a buffer zone is sustained not only by migration policy but also by political decisions that delay enlargement under the guise of security and governance concerns. The EU's approach reflects a dual strategy: control without integration, presence without promise. Enlargement is no longer a linear process but a geopolitically contingent instrument.

Regional Responses and Policy Implications

While the EU's migration policy places the Western Balkans in a reactive and dependent position, the region is not entirely passive. States have developed strategic adaptations to their buffer role, using migration management as both a bargaining tool and a source of international legitimacy. At the same time, these adaptations raise questions about democratic backsliding, human rights protection, and the sustainability of externalized border governance.

Strategic Compliance and Migration Bargaining

Western Balkan states increasingly present themselves as reliable partners in managing migration flows, using this cooperation to gain favor in EU circles and promote their integration agendas. This phenomenon, referred to by scholars as "migration diplomacy", reflects a strategy of leveraging migration control in exchange for financial aid or political concessions.

"Migration governance has been a prominent issue in EU-Western Balkans relations since the early 2000s through the EU's quid-pro-quo strategy, which includes visa facilitation and readmission agreements, as well as the enlargement

process, which in some cases have proceeded in parallel." (IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali)

Serbia, for instance, has emphasized its role in preventing irregular transit across its territory, regularly coordinating with Frontex and neighboring EU states.

Regional Cooperation: Ad Hoc or Strategic?

Despite shared challenges, regional cooperation on migration remains fragmented and driven by external incentives rather than internal solidarity. Initiatives such as the Western Balkans Migration Network (WB-MIGNET) and ad hoc summits with EU representatives have sought to improve coordination, but institutional weaknesses and political rivalries often hinder deeper cooperation.

The "Mini-Schengen" initiative (later rebranded as Open Balkan) exemplifies efforts to liberalize movement and trade within the region, but lacks a cohesive migration component. Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina's asymmetric institutional structure makes coordinated migration governance difficult, particularly in the Federation entity.

Human Rights and the Risk of Democratic Erosion

In complying with EU expectations on migration, some Western Balkan states have adopted security-heavy approaches that neglect basic human rights standards. Reports of pushbacks, detention without due process, and police brutality have been documented by NGOs and international observers, especially at the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

"Since 2015, the Western Balkans region has played a specific strategic role in managing (and ultimately reducing) migration flows directed towards the EU. The EU has gradually consolidated the externalization of migration management, resulting in more people on the move remaining in the region. This has benefited EU member states in terms of their security concerns while increasing pressure on the still fragile systems of the Western Balkans countries." (Carlucci, 2020).

Such developments point to a troubling trade-off between border control efficiency and democratic accountability, which may further delay integration by undermining core EU values.

Externalisation of EU Migration Policy and Its Democratic Implications

The EU's Externalisation Strategy

In recent years, the European Union has increasingly externalized its migration governance by shifting responsibilities for asylum processing, border control, and migrant accommodation to countries outside its borders—particularly the Western Balkans. This strategy includes financial and technical assistance aimed at strengthening local capacities in exchange for compliance with EU migration objectives.

"Since the 1990s, several European countries have actively engaged in the adoption of restrictive domestic policies driven by migration management priorities and focused on the prevention of entry and expulsion of asylum seekers. These have included, among others, restrictive visa policies, carrier sanctions, readmission agreements and arrangements, and the use of safe third country notions" (Carrera & Cortinovis, 2019: 3).

For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina has received significant EU funding to manage migrant reception centers through organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM). However, the country's fragmented political system hampers effective coordination, often leaving migrants stranded in poorly managed or temporary facilities.

Human Rights Concerns and Democratic Backsliding

The externalisation policy has contributed to increasing reports of human rights violations, especially illegal "pushbacks" and the criminalisation of migration across Balkan borders. In Serbia, international observers have documented systematic expulsions of migrants without due process.

"UNHCR reports that the number of people who were returned from neighboring countries to Serbia in September 2020 — 3,115 people — not only exceeded the number of arrivals in September but also marked the highest monthly number of returns recorded since UNHCR Serbia began monitoring returns in the spring of 2016." (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2025).

Such practices undermine the EU's credibility as a normative power and contribute to democratic backsliding in the region. Governments, under pressure to act as EU border enforcers, often adopt emergency powers, increase surveillance, and restrict civil society engagement in migration-related issues.

Risk of Perpetual Limbo

The long-term consequence of this externalisation is that Western Balkan states risk becoming "permanent pre-members," structurally integrated into EU migration governance but institutionally excluded from decision-making. This ambiguous status fosters disillusionment among citizens and opens space for geopolitical actors like Russia, China, and Turkey to exert influence.

Consequently, the Western Balkans [...] remain a permanent testing ground for the EU's ability to act in the self-assigned role of the 'driving force' for conflict transformation." (Reljić, 2011).

Geopolitical Competition in the Western Balkans: The Migration Factor

The Western Balkans are not only a strategic transit zone for migration toward the European Union but also a significant arena of geopolitical competition. While the EU attempts to manage migration flows and control enlargement timelines, other global powers exploit this dynamic to strengthen their influence over the region's political and economic landscape.

Russia's Strategic Interests and Migration Leverage

Russia has maintained a longstanding influence in the Western Balkans through political alliances, energy dependence, and cultural ties, especially with Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moscow perceives the Western Balkans as a buffer against NATO and EU expansion and leverages regional instability to undermine EU cohesion.

Migration issues are instrumentalized by Russia in several ways. Moscow has been known to tacitly support nationalist parties that oppose EU integration and sometimes exploit migrant crises to discredit Western policies.

"The political influence of Russia and Turkey has favoured undemocratic actors, as well as parties who emphasize ethnic and religious affinity to them, often undermining cross-cutting cooperation" (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019: 18).

By supporting political actors skeptical of EU accession, Russia contributes indirectly to the prolonging of Western Balkans' limbo status, where unresolved migration pressures remain a constant challenge. Additionally, Russia's control of critical energy supplies creates economic leverage, which, combined with political backing, enables Moscow to deepen its foothold.

For example, the Russian-owned Gazprom Export provides natural gas to Serbia, tying Belgrade economically to Moscow, while politically Serbia maintains a neutral stance on many EU foreign policy issues, complicating accession talks.

China's Economic Involvement and "Migration Diplomacy"

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has extended deep into the Western Balkans through infrastructure investments and economic partnerships, mainly under the 17+1 framework involving Central and Eastern European countries.

While China's focus is largely economic, it also positions itself as an alternative partner to the EU by emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference, contrasting with the EU's conditionality-based accession model. (Mardell, 2025).

"China's growing economic presence in the Western Balkans, primarily through infrastructure projects and investments, offers countries alternatives to EU-led policies, despite China's limited direct involvement in migration management."

This economic leverage can indirectly affect migration policies, as some Western Balkan governments may align with Chinese interests to diversify foreign partnerships, weakening EU's dominant role in regional governance. For instance, investments in transport corridors and port infrastructure enhance connectivity but may also sideline EU-led environmental and governance standards.

Turkey's Influence and Migration Transit Role

Turkey, a key regional actor and EU candidate country itself, plays a dual role in migration management. It serves as both a host country for millions of refugees and a gateway to Europe, particularly through its cooperation with the EU under the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement.

Turkey's engagement in the Western Balkans includes diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions. Ankara supports infrastructure projects and political alliances in countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, promoting its vision of regional leadership.

"Turkey's migration diplomacy in the Western Balkans seeks to strengthen its position as a key partner for the EU while advancing its own geopolitical interests." (Aydıntaşbaş, 2025).

However, Turkey's position as a migration transit hub also complicates EU efforts to externalize border control, as migrant flows from the Middle East often transit through or originate in Turkey before reaching the Balkans. Additionally,

Turkey's own political dynamics, including its approach to Syrian refugees and internal security concerns, have a direct impact on migration patterns affecting the Balkans.

Turkey also uses cultural diplomacy through religious and educational institutions to strengthen ties with Muslim communities in the Balkans, influencing public opinion and political alignment in the region.

Impact on EU Enlargement Prospects

This multipolar competition complicates the EU's enlargement strategy. While Brussels insists on reforms related to rule of law, migration management, and human rights, competing external actors offer less stringent conditions, creating alternative avenues for Western Balkan countries.

This dynamic prolongs uncertainty and political fragmentation in the region, undermining the EU's capacity to present a coherent and attractive enlargement agenda.

"Thus, the outsiders are also increasing the choice of local political elites who no longer exclusively rely on Western or EU support and can play up (or down) different actors for their own advantage." (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019: 10)

Furthermore, the persistent delays in the accession process have a demoralizing effect on reform efforts. Countries stuck in prolonged candidacy phases face rising nationalism and public skepticism about the benefits of EU membership, which external actors can exploit to deepen their influence.

Conclusion of the Section

Understanding the migration factor within the broader geopolitical competition is crucial to explain the stalled integration process and the sustained role of the Western Balkans as a buffer zone. The intersection of migration pressures and geopolitical interests perpetuates instability and weakens the region's prospects for swift EU accession.

Moreover, the growing influence of non-EU actors in the Western Balkans challenges the EU's narrative of conditionality and normative power. This results in a more fragmented regional order where migration management is increasingly securitized rather than humanitarian. The EU's focus on border fortification and externalization of migration control often neglects the socio-economic root causes of migration, such as unemployment, corruption, and weak governance—factors that non-EU actors sometimes exploit to gain leverage.

The region's young and mobile population is especially vulnerable to these dynamics, as limited opportunities push many to seek better lives abroad. The resulting brain drain further weakens the Western Balkans, perpetuating a cycle of instability that external geopolitical competition benefits from.

Conclusion: Buffer Zone or Future Member?

The Western Balkans remain trapped in a paradoxical position: while geopolitically crucial to the European Union, they continue to be institutionally excluded from full membership. The EU's current approach to the region reveals a deliberate strategy that prioritizes migration control and regional stability over genuine progress toward integration. Through a complex system of readmission agreements, increased border management by EU agencies like Frontex, and the externalization of migration governance, the Western Balkans have effectively been turned into a buffer zone. This arrangement allows the EU to shift responsibility for managing migration flows onto these countries, without granting them the political rights and economic benefits that full membership would entail.

At the same time, countries in the region have responded pragmatically, using cooperation on migration as a means to gain concessions and aid, while simultaneously facing pressure to adopt security measures that often conflict with democratic values and human rights standards. This has created a model of asymmetric integration, in which Western Balkan states participate functionally in certain EU policies, such as trade and security cooperation, but remain excluded from meaningful institutional decision-making and long-term political commitments.

This dynamic raises a fundamental question about the EU's intentions: is it using the Western Balkans as a tool to address its migration challenges while indefinitely delaying their accession? The evidence suggests that the concept of the Western Balkans as a buffer zone has become embedded in EU neighborhood policy, evolving from a temporary measure into a structural reality. Without a significant change in the EU's political will, accompanied by internal reforms and a renewed vision for enlargement, the region risks remaining in a state of limbo—caught between the desire to join Europe and ongoing exclusion.

The EU must reconcile its geopolitical priorities with its normative principles if it wishes to maintain its credibility and influence in the Western Balkans. Continuing to externalize migration control while postponing accession risks undermining the EU's legitimacy in a region where other global powers are actively expanding their influence through economic and political means. For a

sustainable future, the EU needs to separate migration management from the accession process, adopt more rights-focused border policies, and make clear and tangible commitments to the region's European perspective. Only then can the Western Balkans transition from a peripheral buffer zone into a fully integrated and equal member of the European Union, and the EU itself can move from being a fortress defending its borders to a genuine union based on shared values and collective responsibility.

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UNDERSTANDING THE UNKNOWN: EXPLORING THE BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN GREECE AND ALBANIA AND ITS EFFECT ON THE ALBANIAN PROSPECT FOR EU MEMBERSHIP

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Abstract: One of the most interesting and unexplored-aspects of the Balkan peninsula is how Greece and Albania view of each other and how does this affect the Albanian attempt to join the European Union. Without a doubt, Greece and Albania in the recent years began to have closer relations, due to the fall of communism in 1991, and the mass migration of Albanians to Greece that followed. The presence of the national Greek minority in Albania, however, not only affected-and still do-their bilateral relations, but also, they are connected to the EU Enlargement. Taking all these into consideration, the purpose of this paper is to examine and to track the connection between all these aspects. The introductory part will attempt to present the relations between Albanians and Greeks since the Berlin Congress of 1878 and the formation of Albanian state in 1912. The exact number of Greeks in Albania is still unknown, because not only the former Ottoman rule didn't count its subjects by nationality, rather than religion. This didn't change until the Second World War and the prevail of the Albanian communists, who tried to organize the Albanian society in modern terms. After the fall of communism in 1991, the mass migration from Albania-which included a huge number of Greeks-had an important impact between the two countries due to the fact that they tried to re-establish their bilateral relations in the new post-cold war terms. The limitations though that are implemented by the Albanian government in the remaining Greeks, are observed by the Greek government and as a result it puts restrictions to the Albanian prospect of joining the EU.

Keywords: Greece, Albania, European Union, integration

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Introduction

After the eruption of the Greek revolution of 1821 and the formation of the Greek state, Greece tried to find a new path not only towards the Greeks who remained in the Ottoman Empire, but also to revise its relationship with the other Balkan ethnic groups. Throughout the rest of the 19th century and during the national awakening of the rest of the Balkan peoples, Greece had mixed relations with its neighbors, either more friendly (Serbia) or more hostile (Bulgaria). Without any doubt, the one ethnic group that Greece did not have a complete view and still does not in some aspects-are the Albanians. Just as the Greek state tries to find an understanding on what the Albanians claim to be, the purpose of this paper is to present the evolution of the relations between Greece and Albania, not only as ethnic groups but also as nation-states.

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to make an attempt to show the complexity of the relations between Greece and Albania on the one hand. On the other hand, it will attempt to present that EU membership for Albania can be of utter importance to further increase not only the (geo)political stability of the region but also to uncover a new path for cooperation between two possible EU-member states, since Greece is a full EU member and one of the founding countries of the Euro currency.

By using secondary bibliographic sources, this article aims to present the historical claims made by both sides, how they were stated throughout the decades, and how they were affected by the specific political circumstances -the political instability of Albania in the first years of its existence, the unresolved peace of the Interwar period, the rhetoric used by both sides in the Cold War with the different political implications for both countries and the new path that they have to create since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989-91. To put it into perspective, this paper aims to present a more inclusive presentation of the relations between Greece and Albania, whilst noting the importance of the EU ascension to solve the existing issues among them.

Bearing this into mind, this article will first show how the Albanian national movement slowly evolved and became one of the youngest ones in the mid-19th century. Was it due to modern-day Albania's geography? Was it due to its multi-religious population? Secondly, it will present how the bilateral relations of Albania and Greece evolved, firstly on the communal level (since Albania was under Ottoman rule) and throughout the 20th century. It will show how the wishful thinking of the beginning of the century that talked about a dual Greco-Albanian

state, quickly moved towards mutual suspicion during the inter-war period, and once more a repeat of this firstly with a more co-operative feeling up until the end of the Greek Civil War. A small back and forth continued until the military dictatorship that was established in Greece decided to fully resume diplomatic relations with Tirana in 1971, but this resumption came to a halt in 1974 due to the major crisis that emerged from the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus. With the back-and-forth still going after this, in 1981 the relations were put on a different perspective, as the new socialist government of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement(PASOK) in Greece wanted to improve relations with Albania. This positive period ended with the fall of communism in 1989-91, and the new democratic powers that emerged, mostly had former communists who still were carrying on the older prejudices for Greece, thus retaining this rather unstable status-but peaceful nonetheless-of the relations between Greece and Albania.

Lastly, the article will present shortly Albania's path toward its ascension/accession to the European Union and how Greece has assisted Albania to achieving this goal. It will present the obstacles Albania has to overcome, not only internally-by reforming its judiciary system and fighting corruption at its roots-but also on improving relations with Greece, by removing any legal-or other-setbacks that the Greeks of Albania face.

The period of co-existence before the 19th century

Trying to describe Albania as a country is not a rather difficult task. Located in the Southeastern part of Europe more precise in the Balkan Peninsula-and being at the same time mountainous and has a large coastline. At first glance, it seems that Albania, by this description alone, looks like Greece, one of her closest neighbors. Naturally, this is not the case as the Albanian society has its own unique characteristics. One of them is the tribal organization, as the Albanians can be divided into two distinct tribes: the Ghegs and the Tosks, with the first being located in the northern parts of the country and the latter in the southern parts.

Another unique characteristic of the Albanian people is the multi-religious character of it by encompassing different religions and denominations. The south i.e. has a large Orthodox Christian majority, with the north having a relatively high percentage of Roman Catholics whilst the Muslims-as a relative religious majority of the country are scattered throughout Albania (Gawrych, 2006). Ultimately, this societal division had an important impact on the Albanian national awakening, due to the fact that the Muslim community were highly prominent

in the Ottoman administration, with the most well-known example being the Köprülü family, which "gave" a large number of Grand Viziers (the most famous one being Mehmed Köprülü Pasha) (Ristelhueber, 2005).

Despite all these facts, the Albanian national consciousness was on the rise at the end of the 19th century, thanks to some scholars who attempted to create a written Albanian language, among them being Naum Veqilharxhi (neé Bredhi) and Konstadin Kristoforidhi. Veqilharxhi left the Vilayet of Yanya at an early age for Wallachia and got meddled in nationalistic ideas there, by participating in the local revolt of 1821 and after the revolt he attempted to create a new Albanian alphabet. From this new alphabet, Veqilharxhi prompted to defend the "Albanian diaspora". Kristoforidhi on the other hand, did not participate in any armed conflicts, but he also believed that by developing his native language he would preserve the Albanian people and culture. Having this as his aim, he also wrote a book named *Dictionary of the Albanian Language* by travelling to the four Albanian vilayets to gather the necessary material. These written attempts, however, are not the only things that these scholars share. One important aspect of any Balkan scholar of this time was the graduation from a Greek-speaking educational institution, due to the fact that the Greek language was the official language of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, thus a lingua franca amongst the Balkans. Both Veqilharxhi and Kristoforidhi as well as Ismail Qemali- were graduates of the Zossimaia Gymnasium in Yanya (Ioannina), since it was located in the region of Epirus (Gawrych, 2006).

The fact that the Albanian intelligentsia were educated in Greek schools is not that strange as it was the same with the Bulgarian intelligentsia as well-but rather demonstrates a reality of the time. This reality being the co-existence for many centuries between the Greeks and the Albanians in the lands of Epirus. The tensions, however, that raised in the 19th century, meant that both communities claimed Epirus for their national causes. Albanians on the one hand, claimed that they have the ancient Illyrians, who inhabited the-modern day Albanian-lands, as their own ancestors. They also claimed that the Greeks beyond the cities of Arta and Grevena did not live in these areas. On the other hand, Greeks claim that river Shkumbin is the border-natural and national-between the two peoples and the peoples who migrated from the Albanian areas to modern day Greece in the 14th century actually became Greeks since they were assimilated throughout all these years of coexistence. This claim however created the false impression that the Albanians were some sort of "second-class" Greeks, since they became Christians and spoke Greek alongside their native language (Divani, 2010).

The Greco-Albanian relations from the mid-19th century to the end of the Second Balkan War

In the mid-19th century, and especially after the Crimean War, not only the Great Powers of Europe were convinced for the decline of the Ottoman Empire thus raising the question on what will happen with the lost Ottoman lands-but also the Balkan peoples were preparing to take any advantage from it. For the Greeks, the success of the revolution and the presentation of the country's territorial aims- the 'Megali idea"-by the Prime Minister Ioannis Kolettis in 1844 set the tone. Greece managed to expand in 1864 by the annexation of the Ionian Islands, as a "gift" to the new King of Greece, George I from Britain. Right before his coronation in Athens, he negotiated with the British to expand into Thessaly and Epirus, but his request was declined. This set the tone for the future direction for Greece. These plans however were realized by the Albanians who sensed the immediate threat to their own territorial aims, since the Greeks wanted the land of Epirus, the Montenegrins the northern bordering lands ans the Serbs a territorial way towards the Adriatic Sea. Despite this misstrust, the Greek side made a last attempt to negotiate with the Albanians in 1877, but it also failed. The basic reason of this failure was the Greek proposal for the creation of a dual Greco-Albanian kingdom, with the Albanians rejecting it, since they aimed to the creation of an independent Albanian state.

Shortly after this attempt, an Albanian delegation sent a memorandum to the Sublime Porte, in order to prevent any partitions, but shortly after, in 1878, the Treaty of San Stefano granted Bulgaria a part of Kosovo. This could not be accepted by the Albanian side, and right before the Congress of San Stefano the Albanian intelligentsia, including Abdyl Frashëri, and many chieftains met in Prizren and formed a League, which declared the national independence of the Albanians and the creation of an autonomous Albanian states from the vilayets of Shkodra, Ioannina, Kosovo and Monastir. Apart from the formation of the League, Albanian and Greek communities in Epirus were fighting hard for their national claims on the land with the Albanians defending the vilayet of Shkodra from the Montenegrin forces. Despite their attempts, the new Congress of Berlin in 1881-which nullified the previous San Stefano treaty-granted Montenegro a portion of the northern Albanian parts and Greece the kaza of Arta and Thessaly and the League of Prizren was dissolved by the Ottomans. In the years between the Berlin Congress and the beginning of the Balkan wars in 1912, boththe Greeks and the Albanians remained in a highly tense situation. Since the beginning of the 20th century, they were preparing for any further territorial claims on Epirus. The Greeks were getting armed because they were preparing

to fight for their national claims on Ottoman Macedonia against the emerging and rapidly developed Bulgarian insurgents thanks to their Supreme Macedonian Committee in Sofia and its branch on Macedonia, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization. The Albanians, on the other hand, had their own National Congress in the city of Manastir in 1908, in which they coded their own language and alphabet, thus enabling them to further strengthen their national unity. The Greeks, however, made one last attempt to get closer with the Albanians and both the Prime Minister of Greece Georgios Theotokis, and the Albanian leader then an Ottoman MP Ismail Qemali agreed to move on to a mutual understanding between the two communities, through the teaching of both Greek and Albanian in schools. The eruption of the Balkan war on October, 1st 1912 by the Balkan alliance, consisting of Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro changed the plans. It gave a halt to any cooperation efforts, as the Greeks were fully focused on regaining Epirus and-most importantly-Macedonia with Thessaloniki. After securing both the Macedonian and Epirote fronts, the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos ordered the Greek army to move towards Himara, aiming to use the city as a diplomatic advantage for him. The Albanians did not allow this to happen and on November, 28th 1912, they signed the declaration of their independence in Vlora and elected Qemali by a provisional government as the first Prime Minister. After the war, all the victorious Balkan countries met in London during the war at the same time with the Ambassadorial Congress of the Great Powers in order to settle the upcoming territorial disputes. Both the Serbs and Montenegrins wanted to dismantle the new Albanian state, whilst Greece claimed the sanjaks of Korça and Gjirokastra and the rest of Vilayet of Ioannina. Austria-Hungary and Italy dismissed all these territorial claims fully supporting the preservation of Albania, as it was an obstacle to the aggressive Serbian plans for an exodus to the Adriatic Sea. In the midst of all these negotiations behind the scenes, the Greek army managed to enter to Ioannina on February, 2nd 1913 heading north, albeit during the negotiations in London, the Balkan Alliance was declined any further territories due to the creation of Albania. The Greeks did not stop and marched through the north, reaching Gjirokastra to the north and Këlcyre to the east, to the dislike of the Great Powers. With the Serbs being granted Kosovo by the Austro-hungarians, Greece was forced to leave from the lands it conquered as it would greatly outrage Albanians, since they lost Kosovo, and would not be able to take the North-eastern Aegean islands. On May, 17th/30th 1913, the Treaty of London recognized the loss of all the former Ottoman lands by the Balkan alliance, whilst a Protocol acknowledged the existence of the Albanian state.

The main issue left disputed demarcation of the border between Greece and Albania, leaving the matter to the responsibility of the Great Powers in the foreseeable future. At the same time, the Balkan Alliance was dissolved to the distrust of Bulgaria, targeting the newly-conquered Macedonian lands of Greece, starting a second Balkan War in July 1913, with the sides now being the former member of the Balkan Alliance, with the aid of the Ottoman Empire and Romania. Shortly after the start of the war, the Great Powers set up a committee with the purpose of defining the Greco-Albanian border. This committee had the language as its basic national criterion for the border setting, albeit there were bilingual communities of Greeks, Albanians and even some Vlachs. The choice of language as the basic criterion was met with disapproval by Venizelos, since many Albanian-speaking Christians were considered Greeks, as he believed, thus proposing the national-consciousness being the basic criterion for the committee, with language and religion having a secondary role. Thanks to the immense pressure of the Great Powers, Venizelos was forced to abandon his claims on Northern Epirus, fearing the invalidation of the new Greek border and the dispute of the Aegean lands. In the end, the Treaty of Bucharest was signed on August, 13th 1913, ratifying the new borders of the Balkan states, with the Greco-Albanian border being set by the Florence Protocol on December, 17th 1913, granting Saranda, Vlora and Korçë to Albania. This border dispute however would be finally settled after the First World War (Divani, 2010).

The situation from the First World War to the end of the Second World War

The start of the First World War in August 1914 found the Balkan powers ready to revise the borders defined by the previous treaties. The side of Entente lured Greece to enter the war with the Allies by allowing them to capture Northern Epirus. Although the Greek army returned to the areas it held during the Balkan wars, the elections of 1915, the abdication of Prime Minister Venizelos and the choice of the King Constantine II not to align with either side of the war, caused Britain to call Italy to control these lands, thus allowing Italy to enter the war on the side of the Entente in 1915. The situation returned to that of the beginning of war as the Greek king abdicated and Venizelos returned from Thessaloniki in 1917. The Greek and Serbian presence in Albanian lands raised the question whether Albania will disappear, thus creating a massive wave of nationalism throughout the country with the purpose of retaining the country's territorial integrity and independence. The end of the war in 1918 however, found Albania with an unexpected ally in the President of the United States Woodrow Wilson,

since he favored the self-determination of the Balkan peoples as mentioned in his Fourteen Points speech. Despite this, the Greeks did not give in to the Allied pressure on abandoning Northern Epirus, as Venizelos was using this as a mean of pressure to his territorial claims to the area. The diplomatic maneuvers during 1918-1920 outraged the new Albanian government, who fought the Italian army present in Albania and hardened its stance towards the Greeks of Albania. In the end, the government managed to force the Italians and the Greek army to abandon the country, much to the disapproval of Venizelos. The Greek Prime Minister did not want to have any conflict with the Entente, since the Treaty of Sèvres was to be agreed and signed and he was planning on getting territories from Thrace and Asia Minor, thus abandoning Northern Epirus, please the Entente. He found an unexpected ally in Albania, because the new government tried not only to rebuild and stabilize the country but to retain its territorial integrity and independence, hence it halted any attacks on the Greeks. Despite the previous conflict between the Italian army and the Albanians, Italy offered itself as a guarantor power for Albania's entry in the League of Nations, which became official on December, 17th 1920.

Once Albania entered the League, it requested international mediation on her issue with Greece about Northern Epirus. Another issue that remained unresolved was the Greco-Albanian border, which practically did not exist during the war. In the end, the Ambassadorial Congress decided to guarantee the border as defined by the previous Protocol of Florence, which finally became official on July, 30th 1926 with the signing of another protocol in the same city. The main issue there was the split of Çamëria/Epirus, because Albania took Saranda and the Delvina District, whereas Greece had an important muslim population of almost 20.500 Albanian Chams. Greece tried to use these populations as a coutnerweight in the upcoming negotiations with Turkey in Lausanne, by including them in the exchanging populations. Thanks to the Albanian objection-with the help of Italy the Chams did not leave Greece for Turkey, stating that despite the common religion, they were not Turks. The Cham presence in Greek Epirus was an improtant counterweight to Greece's plan on Northern Epirus, since the Greek populations there did not leave the area, discouraging Greece from any expansionist policies (Divani, 2010).

This discouragement however gave Albania the opportunity to pressure even more the Greeks in the country by suspending all the Greek-language schools. This decision can easily be explained by the logic of the fifth column that was rather dominant throughout Europe during the inter-war period. Simultaneously, Albeit the rather problematic relations between the two countries, the

situation got worse once Italy emerged as the protector of Albania. The official annexation of Albania by Italy in April 1939 put Athens on high alert, since the Greek government desperately avoided any kind of conflict, but on the governmental level it declared its neutrality towards the annexation. This encouraged the Italians to press even harder the Greeks, by sending-Cham agents spreading the Italian propaganda. The Italian aggression became official firstly on April 9th, 1940, by declaring that Albania was in a state of war with Greece, secondly on October 28th 1940 after the rejection by the Greek dictator Ioannis Metaxas of the Italian ultimatum demanding the Greek capitulation to Italy and lastly on Novemeber 10th 1940, by a law that designated Italy and all italian territory including Albania-as a hostile country. This started the future quarrel on the state of war issue, that still drags on to this day and is used mostly by the Albanian side, since Greece considers it done by a Presidential Decree, which nullified the 1940 law.

Once Greece was conquered by the Italians with some Albanians among their ranks and German forces on April, 20th 1941, it was split into three areas of occupation: German, Italian and Bulgarian. This meant that the Chams of Epirus could be used as security forces to preserve law and order in the area, much to the discontent of the locals. At the same time, in Albania a resistance movement was emerging against the Axis power, organized by the Communist Party of Albania. In 1942, at the Conference of Pezë, the National Liberational Anti-Fascist Front (LANÇ) was created by the communists and their leader, Enver Hoxha.

This cooperation between the Greek and Albanian partizans is confirmed also by the participation and merge of the Greeks of Northern Epirus into LANÇ, which was decided by prominent Greek partizans such as Lefter Talo and Thanas Ziko who gave their names to the "Thanas Ziko" and "Lefter Talo" battalion after the end of the war. Shortly after, the communists prevailed in the struggle against the occupying Axis forces thus being the sole force resisting. In Albania, on May 28th 1944, Hoxha organized a provisional government in Përmet, and later on November, 28th he entered Tirana, thus liberating the country from the Axis powers, and afterwards he won the elections of December 1945 and created the People's Republic of Albania in January 10th, 1946 (Ntagios, 2015).

The relations after the end of the Second World War

The situation in Greece, however, was really turbulent, due to the strength of the National Liberation Front (EAM) it had because of its vicious struggle against the Germans but also the Greek right-wing forces, such as the Greek Democratic National Army(EDES). On October 18th, 1944, Georgios Papandreou returned to

Athens and established a national salvation government with the help of the British, as they were joined by a British Expeditionary Force led by General Scobie. EAM was not pleased with the British presence and, since it enjoyed massive support from the population, it initiated armed skirmishes around Athens on December 4th 1944, in order to install a pro-Soviet government. The Yalta Agreement, however, proved disastrous, as the Soviet Union would not support the Greek communists and led to the subsequent defeat of EAM, which became official on February, 12th 1945 by the signing of the Varkiza Agreement, that led to EAM's disarmament. The Greek government of Themistoklis Sofoulis proclaimed elections in March 1946 and a referendum on the return of the king, to the displease of the Communist Party of Greece(KKE). The Party declared its boycott from the elections, as it feared further repressive measures against it, but in reality it was preparing for the next armed conflict against the Greek government that launched a rather vicious hunt towards the communists (Gallant, 2017).

Once the civil war began in Greece both Yugoslavia and Albania helped with every mean possible the fighting communist forces, by hosting training camps for the armed rebels in Bulkes/Maglić, Yugoslavia and Rubik, Albania. Despite the help that the Albanians and Yugoslavs gave to the Greeks, they could not maintain a unified front, as the Albanians were displeased with the Greeks due to their stance in the Northern Epirus issue, the help continued until 1948. Once the Soviet-Yugoslav split occurred, not only the Yugoslavs stopped aiding the Greek communists by closing the borders (they used the border areas as safepoints), because they were aligned with Moscow. This gave the Albanians the chance to further strengthen their alliance with the Soviet Union, thus giving the Greek communists another pillar of support. The announcement of the Truman Doctrine by the-then-US President Harry S. Truman in March 1947 completely change the course of the civil war. Since Albania could only provide for the Greeks the necessary weaponry from the port of Durrës, and the Soviet Union did not aid them with any weapons either, the Greek communist army accepted its loss and in October 1949, the civil war officially ended (Ntagios, 2015).

In the early 1950's, Greece pursed towards a more pragmatic policy towards Albania. Due to the emerging Yugoslav pressure in the Balkans, the coalition government of the Centre moved towards the resume of the diplomatic relations with Tirana as early as1953. The reason of this attitude was the emerging issue of Yugoslavia completely controlling the Adriatic coast, and thus being much harder to be restrained. Subsequently, Evangelos Averoff stated that Albania had to retain its independence, in order to avoid the above. The new Papagos

government in 1952 stated-like with all the previous governments-that Greece would purse Northern Epirus solely on peaceful means. Albania however was in a difficult situation, because there was a rapprochement between Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia and the US were considering an operation that would topple Hoxha's regime. This operation was planned in 1953 by a coalition of Western powers-including Greece-and a pro-Western Albanian committee, but subsequently it failed due to the Italian support for Albania's independence, despite the ultimatums Greece gave to Albania demanding the respect of the international obligations of the latter to the Greeks of Northern Epirus as agreed in 1913.

After the failure of the operation however, and much to the arisen Italian and Yugoslav intervention, the Greek government realizes that its claim on Northern Epirus was not possible without any Italian and Yugoslav reaction. The first step though, was made by the Albanian government in the summer of 1953, that proposed the re-establishment of the frontier pyramids, through the UN. Greece rejected this proposal, stating that both countries were still in a state of war, leaving the matter to the General Staffs of both countries. The Soviet and Bulgarian opening towards Greece, gave Albania one last chance to purse the normalization of the bilateral relations, proposing the resumption of them without the signing of a Peace Treaty. The Greeks went to the Americans for advice, with the latter stating that this was up to Athens whether to agree with this or not. The Greek Foreign Ministry suggested the opening of an embassy in Tirana, since there was an Italian and a Yugoslav embassy-with the aim of observing the situation in Northern Epirus-but the US did not agree with it, as they claimed the memories of the war were still vivid. One major issue too was the problems that the Greek government faced because of its Cyprus policy and the attacks of the opposition parties. In spite of the entry of Albania to the United Nations in December 1955, the two General Staffs could not reach an agreement, thus ending any normalization attempts for the moment (Hatzivassiliou, 2006).

With the political instability that was ongoing in Athens, the Stephanopoulos government wanted to normalize relations with Albania stating that the existing state of war was 'ridiculous'. In 1966, Athens requested France to be an intermediary with Tirana and in March the Greek government was able to achieve the signing of a commercial agreement by the Greek and Albanian Chambers of Commerce in March. This was a very first step, as it was the only post-war agreement yet signed by the two sides, albeit it was not really implemented because of Albania's decline to sign the necessary payments and Pipinelis' support for the claim on Northern Epirus-thus fearing the bring-down of the government because of its small majority on the Parliament (Hatzivassiliou, 2006).

After the death of Joseph Stalin, Albania still continued to have relations with the Soviet Union and had high hopes of incoming Soviet help. The new Soviet General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev however, visited Belgrade in 1956 and met with Tito attempting to re-establish relations once again with Yugoslavia. This development, along with the official Soviet request for the usage of the port of the city of Vlorë and the rejection of it by the Albanians, made clear to Hoxha that the alliance with the Soviet Union could not be stand. An important factor to this insecurity was the fact that Albania was a member of the Warsaw Pact, making the country even more insecure to any Soviet pressure. As a result, Albania came in contact with the Communist Party of China in 1956, by sending a delegation to Beijing for the 8th Party Congress. This relation gradually became closer and more cooperative, and they officially declared their alliance in 1966 with the signing of a "Sino-Albanian Declaration". Albania officially left the Warsaw Pact in 1968, after the Prague Spring and the Pact's forces invasion of Czechoslovakia, declaring it as an 'aggressive pact', along with Romania, as Ceausescu was seeking a relative independence from the Soviet Union.

The benefits were equally important for both sides, as for Albania it meant an even larger military aid and more modern know-how to modernize the country. For China though, the Albanian alliance had more of a diplomatic importance out of all things, because the UN states who recognized the People's Republic of China as the legitimate permanent representative member state of China in the United Nations Security Council, instead of the Republic of China located in Taiwan. Another important aspect was the ideological alignment of Albania to the Maoist principles of "cleansing the pure revolutionary society from all the revisionist and bourgeois elements' (Musabelliu, 2019).

Greece, on the other hand, faced sore difficulties as well in the 1950's. Despite the economic boom that the country faced under the government of Konstantinos Karamanlis' National Radical Union (ERE), the strict laws and the climate for leftist politicians were not loosened, even though the government did not do anything to pressure them. The 1960's made these difficulties more massive. To them, we must include the political instability that the country faced due to the Palace's multiple interventions since 1963 when Karamanlis abdicated as Prime Minister, because the Palace did not like his attempt to change Greece's constitution by removing its ability to intervene into the Prime Minister's election. Since 1963 though, the country's governments were in fact ineffective as they had to align with the Palace in order to retain their power, whilst having the majority of the Parliament. This was not possible and created a perpetual political instability, which was exploited by conservative elements of the Greek army, who had

some previous plan to stage a coup d'état, achieving this in April 21st 1967. As it can be seen, both countries were more focused on their issues than on resuming relations (Gallant, 2017).

The situation however, changed during the Greek military junta, as it was seeking recognition from every country possible since it was banned from the Council of Europe in 1969, essentially leading to its diplomatic isolation. In Albania, the military regime found a country to use as a diplomatic ally, despite the massive ideological issue between the two. Firstly, they both re-established relations on the level of Chambers of Commerce but the most important thing was the opening of the embassies on both capitals in 1971-the Greek Embassy in Tirana and the Albanian Embassy in Athens. Generally, the bilateral relations were relatively calmly as the Greek military regime was careful not to arouse any problems for the Albanians, as it feared any return to its diplomatic isolation. The Turkish military intervention on Cyprus in 1974 and the eventual collapse of the junta, generally put the Balkans on edge, since a general war on the Balkans was a possibility between Greece and Turkey mostly. Albania was alarmed, since it feared any military operations near its borders, and was aligned with Yugoslavia in order to avoid a new Balkan war, simultaneously condemning the actions of the Turkish military. Regarding the relations with Greece though, once the new government of the New Democracy party under Konstantinos Karamanlis rose to power in November 1974, the new Greek government retained a small channel with the Albanians. Because the Greeks already had left NATO-on the military level-in 1974(and would return to the alliance in 1980) and were focused on Greece's ascension to the European Community, they did not give any importance to the relations with Albania, leading to the conservation of the relatively warm relations.

A total shift was taken as the government in Greece changed once again, in 1981, by the rise of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement party (PASOK) under Andreas Papandreou. His friendlier attitude towards not only to the Arab countries, but also to the Eastern Bloc (he was the only Western political leader who visited Poland after the coup of Wojciech Jaruzelski) was a satisfactory development to the Albanians. Their assumptions were correct, as the Greek Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias, advocated for the further normalization of the relations with Albania, since he was from Epirus and he wanted to improve the situation for the Greeks of Albania. During the PASOK's government two major events occurred to confirm this positive atmosphere: first, the opening of the border post in Kakavja in 1984 and second, the removal of the 1940 state-of-war by the Greek Parliament. The latter was met with a huge distrust amongst the other parties, since they did not have the same opinion as PASOK because they advocated for the

protection of the Greeks of Albania from the "Albanian oppression". An important milestone happened though, as on April 18th 1985, the General Secretary of the Party of Labor of Albania Enver Hoxha passed away at 78 years of age, thus ending his almost 40-year-old rule in the country. His successor Ramiz Alia, did not change anything to the status of the relations but he was rather focusing on the emerging serious economic problems that Albania was facing due to its complete isolation since 1976. At rthe end of the 1980's, problems were emerging from both sides, as the Albanian were speaking more openly about liberalizing the government by forcing the communists to abdicate, whilst Greece was on the verge of a corruption scandal and the political instability that it brought, as there elections were held in two (!) years from 1989 to 1991. In the end, in Greece a new government, under New Democracy with Konstantinos Mitsotakis as the Prime Minister, came into power and in Albania due to the massive student' protests the communists were forced to hold elections in 1991, in which they won again, but could not stop the massive request for the liberalization of the country. In the end, the communists lost the monopoly of their power, by allowing the formation of other political parties, eventually (by 1992) ending the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (Ntagios, 2015).

The EU aspect to the Greco-Albanian relations

After the fall of communism in 1989 and since the beginning of the 21st century, the EU already considered the Balkans including Albania as a strategic partner. More precisely, after the 11 September hit the *European Security Strategy* was presented by the Council of the EU in 2003. One of its primary objectives was that the EU must be an important factor in the democratization process of the Balkan countries whilst dealing with the organized crime. This has to happen due to the fact that the new threats will not use solely military means, but rather a widespread network of terrorist attacks aiming to create tensions. It also mentioned that the integration process of the acceding states would increase the EU presence in these states, and consequently the democratization process by creating well-governed states (Council of the EU, 2003).

In the 1990's, Albania was connected with the European Union, as Greece was the main partner to the country's development funding. There are many drawbacks however to this, as the situation in Albania was rather unstable and the new democratic government directed towards more national policies, by putting up limitations to the Greeks. Atomic incidents towards Greeks and vice versa, like the 1994 Peshkopi incident in which 3 Albanian soldiers were killed by a Greek nationalist organization, and the 2010 death of a Greek in Himara by Albanian nationalists,

jeopardize the positive steps that Albania has made and still makes. Despite all these problems, Greece is one of the closest allies of Albania, since it was one of the first countries that recognized the new democratic government in 1991, it was among the peacekeeping force that went to Albania in 1999, after the collapse of the country's economy due to the pyramid schemes (Antonopoulos, 2022).

Albania started the integration process as early as 2003, shortly after the publication of the European Security Strategy, with the official negotiations beginning in 2009. Since then, Albania has completed a vast number of the Copenhagen criteria, necessary to join the EU, yet some of the criteria are far from being completed with one of them being the reformation of the judicial system and the removal of corruption (Dhamo & Dhamo, 2024). At the moment, the progress of Albania is not as expected, since many electoral frauds are recorded for the last 25 years, i.e. in the elections of 2000 and 2003. Despite these setbacks, Albania managed to get a visa-free status in 2010 for the EU member states, expecting some further steps from Brussels, but excluding Greece's opinion. The only major setback for this Albanian perspective is Greece, because the latter aims to solve any bilateral issues-such as the guaranteed protection of the Greek minority in Albania and the implementation of the Exclusive Economic Zone(EEZ) on the EU level, including Greece (Mallias, 2025).

Conclusions

Summarizing, Greece and Albania although they border each other and share a rather common past due to the Ottoman conquest, they do not really know each other. On one hand, Greece was not interested to come into contact with the Albanians, due to the "Megali Idea" plan, aiming to take the Albanian lands that the Greeks inhabited. On the other hand, Albanians once they realized the threats they were facing since 1878, thus fighting fiercely for the creation of their own state and since its creation in 1912, fighting for preserving its independence and its territorial integrity.

The two countries did have bilateral relations, but they were rather suspicious as both had populations within each other's land, thus making it hard to really move forward and normalize their relations. This suspiciousness was ongoing since the official normalization in 1971 with the opening of embassies on both capitals and with a small period of cooperation from the 1940's until the end of the Greek civil war in 1949. But even though, they managed to normalize their relations, both countries did less to strengthen this process, because the new government of New Democracy that emerged in Greece was more interested in

the country's ascension to the European Community. The course changed once PASOK went into power in 1981, as it was aiming a normalization with all the Eastern Bloc countries, since it advocated for social reforms. Whilst it was continued after Hoxha's death in 1985, Albania was facing serious economicl and political problems, eventually leading to the Communist Party's collapse in 1991 and proclaiming the new democratic government.

After the fall of communism in 1991, Greece and Albania despite any emerging problems, had on a general level good bilateral relation. The main issue to this is the difficulties that the Albanian government puts to the Greeks of Albania, both on economic and political level. As a result, Greece always connects Albania's ascension to the European Union, with the improvement of the situation of the Greeks there, along with the criteria that the EU, including the reformation of the judicial system and the fighting of the corruption.

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