



ARTICLE

Where is the European frontier? The Balkan migration crisis and its impact on relations between the EU and the Western Balkans

Emilio Cocco

Published online: 18 December 2017
© The Author(s) 2017. This article is an open access publication

Abstract For centuries the Western Balkans region has been a place of origin for migration into Europe as well as a transit route to Europe for migrants coming from other regions of the world. The 2015–16 migration crisis brought the region into the spotlight as large numbers of migrants used the Balkan migration route on their way to Western Europe. Individual countries and the EU institutions developed weak and often contradictory responses to the crisis. This has had a negative effect on the Balkan peoples' perception of the EU, which had previously been positive. On a symbolic level the migration crisis has revealed the fragile relationship between the EU and the Western Balkan states. In the future, EU policy should focus on developing an integrated strategy for managing its external borders and migration, one that prevents member states from pushing back migrants at their borders.

Keywords Western Balkans | EU frontier | Migration | Borders

E. Cocco (✉)
Facoltà di Scienze della Comunicazione, Università degli Studi di Teramo, Campus Coste S.
Agostino, Via R. Balzarini 1, 64100 Teramo, Italy
e-mail: ecocco@unite.it

Introduction

Using the appropriate frameworks and methodologies, researchers are increasingly studying borders and frontiers as social phenomena (Wilson and Donnan 1998). ‘Borders’, ‘frontiers’, and ‘boundaries’ are the most typical words used, often interchangeably, to describe something represented spatially by lines. These terms generally describe a line that possesses an outward orientation that is usually closed and fixed but that can be ‘permeable’ and ‘moving’ (Strassoldo 1982). More specifically, the semantics of borders often reveals a dialectical relationship between a totally ‘fixed border line’, on the one hand, and a ‘vague frontier space’, on the other (Topaloglou 2009). In Central and Eastern European languages, for instance, there are words which are similar to ‘border’ but which defy the geographical linearity and fixity of border-ness. Rather, they refer to a different representation whereby borders are represented more as place-based and socially shaped contact areas: in other words, frontier spaces like imperial boundary areas and edges (i.e. *krajna*) (Ivakhiv 2006). That borders are place-based and socially shaped is also true of the Mediterranean region, where, as Bechev and Nicoladis (2010, 11) point out, the frontier ‘creates its own universe, as well as reshaping the social world around it’. Frontiers have symbolic features which transcend their immediately visible features, for example, gates, checkpoints or temporary detention camps. They represent instruments of power which simultaneously create spaces of exchange, exclusion and inclusion (Green 2005; Donnan 2015).

For centuries the Western Balkans have been a frontier region where migration between Europe, Asia and Africa has taken place. The region has served alternatively as a transit area and a point of origin for migration—it has sometimes served as both simultaneously (Düvell 2012; Papadopoulos 2007). Even today, the border between the EU and the Western Balkans is composed of material elements (including gates, checkpoints, temporary detention camps, cameras and biometric devices) and symbolic legacies that reinforce asymmetric power relationships between states and are reminders of previous imperial dominance, sometimes revived by EU policies.

Since the 1990s the Western Balkans have played the role of a dynamic European frontier. Its transformations have gone together and interacted with changes in the European institutions (Uvalić 2002). The collapse of Communism started the process of further European integration. Furthermore, during their transition periods, former Communist states adopted reforms geared toward integration in European and Atlantic institutions—although in recent years it has become less certain that this goal will be achieved (Bechev 2011).

The Western Balkans are currently facing new threats, while at the same time, some of the region’s old apprehensions are coming back to life. Old masters and new power-hungry players are standing in the wings, including Turkey, Russia, China and Iran. Global terrorist networks are conducting recruiting campaigns all over the region, with a special focus on the Muslim areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo. At the same time, the region is being negatively impacted by two simultaneous but opposing processes: nationalism and regional

integration. These processes have been revived as a consequence of the collapse of Albania's institutions, the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and the parallel process of European enlargement (Cocco 2013). If current trends continue, the region is likely to become more volatile, and the Balkan Peninsula may once more become a 'powder keg'.

Stability in the Western Balkans is linked with the political health of the EU. In other words, the Western Balkans act as a barometer of European affairs: the more stable the EU, the more stable the Western Balkans. In light of this interdependency, the frictions between the EU and the Western Balkans in managing the migration crisis reflect the deteriorating state of both the EU and the Western Balkans. It is important to understand this relationship, of which the case of the Balkan migration route is indicative, and to develop EU policies accordingly.

Migration in the Balkans and the re-emergence of the frontier

The Balkan migration route had already become popular with migrants in 2012 (see Vathi 2015, 9). But it was not until May 2015 that, as a result of the migration crisis, the Western Balkans received extensive international press coverage (*European Western Balkans* archives 2017). The Balkan migration route was the only viable pathway for the massive influx of migrants from the Middle East and Africa. According to the United Nations, 80% of the almost one million refugees that found shelter in Germany in 2015 passed through this route by either registering at the Presevo centre in Serbia (600,000) or bypassing it and moving on (Mandić 2017a).

The 2015 influx was not only larger than the influxes of previous years but also very different in its composition. Displaced persons from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan fled war or political prosecution and sought asylum in the EU. Thus, while migrants had earlier been classified as either 'legal immigrants' or 'illegal immigrants', now new categories were added, including 'asylum-seeker', 'refugee' and 'beneficiary of subsidiary protection' (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016).

The crisis of 2015–16 revealed the political instability of not only the Western Balkans but also the EU. The migration trends are important since they point to wider problems involving political stabilisation and the unfinished transition process in the Western Balkans (Bonifazi et al. 2014). For instance, the region is vulnerable to drug trafficking and human trafficking, particularly of illegal migrants from Asia and Africa. This is why the stabilisation of the Balkans and their fuller integration in the EU framework is a crucial step for European security policy as a whole (Kotevska 2010).

(Mis)managing the Balkan migration crisis?

The re-emergence of the border question in the Western Balkans highlights shortcomings in the EU's policy on this region. The border management practices (migration management, border control, visa arrangements and so on) proved incapable of handling a humanitarian emergency that required fast responses while protecting human rights. The EU provided the Western Balkans with neither integrated long-term projects aimed to secure its borders nor a shared value system to aspire to, which would presumably have improved domestic border management practices. Instead, the EU's policy on the Western Balkans was ambivalent and sometimes even contradictory, at one moment offering assistance and at another tightening control. The April 2016 deal with Turkey reinforced the notion that the EU lacked an overarching policy on its south-eastern Mediterranean frontier. The absence of such a policy might have encouraged smugglers to relocate migration flows to Italy through the Strait of Sicily (Weber 2017, 9). The deal sent a negative message which opened the EU to suspicions of double standards and revealed a 'run for your life' approach (Neag 2015).

At first, countries on the edge of the Schengen area (e.g. Hungary) and neighbouring non-EU countries such as Serbia and Montenegro were responsible for dealing with the large numbers of migrants. Migrants from Central Asia and the Middle East, joined by Somalis and Eritreans, crossed into Hungary, requested asylum and were accommodated in already existing refugee centres. Quite soon the EU took responsibility and alleviated the social and material burden of the crisis. It provided both financial assistance and material support, especially after Angela Merkel's influential 'Wir schaffen das' (We can do it) declaration on 31 August 2015 (Wittrock and Elmer 2016).

Merkel's announcement sounded in many ways like a call for asylum seekers to head towards Germany. The EU, international NGOs and local governments helped asylum seekers, many of whom were illegal migrants, to journey northward. Local governments facilitated this movement by using specially organised trains and buses to send illegal migrants across the border. Governments effectively replaced what had been illegal service providers (*passeurs*, traffickers and other agents of mediation) with state-owned buses, trains and vans that progressively connected border transit points along the route (Mandić 2017a, 6). At the same time, however, governments were still supposed to stop and reject illegal migrants, and they continued their activities to stop smugglers. This suggests an ambivalence which reflects poorly on the EU.

Furthermore, this ambivalence was reproduced all along the Balkan route as states both opposed and facilitated the influxes of migrants (Greider 2017). The immediate victims were the migrants themselves. For instance, the journey from the Greek islands, one of the most common landing points for illegal migrants, to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was mostly organised by the Greek state, using state-owned vehicles. But the sea passage from Turkey was still in the hands of human traffickers and therefore subject to police intervention. For fear of prosecution, human traffickers adopted dangerous tactics for ferrying migrants from Turkey to Greece, such as sending migrants in boats without captains (Mandić 2017a, 6). In consequence, highly visible

human tragedies occurred. One well-known example took place in autumn 2015, when the body of a Syrian toddler lying face down on a Turkish shore became a symbol of the dangers migrants were undertaking to reach the EU. Tactics similar to those used between Turkey and Greece were employed in the Mediterranean Sea near Sicily, where human traffickers rigged boats to sink in the proximity of humanitarian vessels.

The situation progressively worsened (Sardelic 2017) as the media continued reporting on these human tragedies. EU member states began to fear negative political fallout from the crisis. As a consequence, they put pressure on the Balkan countries, which, in turn, placed restrictions on the movement of migrants and even closed borders. Due to the lack of supranational coordination and of a coherent EU policy, migrants travelling the Balkan route faced the following paradox. The Balkan countries facilitated transit along the route with the support of international humanitarian organisations while EU member states pushed them to stop the incoming flows. In particular, to avoid becoming a cul-de-sac for trapped migrants, the EU member states tacitly promoted a domino effect based on the assumption that if one country stopped the flow, the others might well follow (Finnian 2017).

The crisis peaked in the summer of 2015, at which point hundreds of thousands of migrants had arrived in the EU via the Western Balkans. Migrants still in the Western Balkans had little hope of moving further west and north within the EU as they would have been stopped and sent back. They became trapped in Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which, paradoxically, are outside the Schengen area and had not been integrated into a comprehensive EU strategy. In other words, the peripheral transit countries suffered because of the lack of cooperation from the destination countries, namely the northern EU member states. Consequently, the Western Balkan countries, which were confronted with difficult logistical challenges, allowed migrants to travel freely along the Balkan route. The flow of migrants reached Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary, where the migrants were obliged to comply with the Dublin Regulation: those seeking protection must apply for it in the first EU country of arrival. In July 2017 the European Court of Justice confirmed the applicability of this regulation (Sardelic 2017). Thus, migrants who managed to reach an EU state and then travelled on to another one could be sent back to their alleged point of entry, which put an additional strain on countries which were not the final destination of the migratory flows. Many migrants registered for asylum but then moved on and abandoned the country of application.

In November 2015 border guards in Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia began subjecting migrants to an unofficial but effective selection process on the basis of nationality. Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers were allowed to move onwards, while all others were rejected as being 'illegal immigrants' (Weber 2017). In February 2017 Hungary passed a law stating that pushbacks were legal within the entire country and not only at the border, thus widening the range of options available to those responsible for managing the migration flows (Weber 2017, 15).

Only an apparent closure of the route

The April 2016 deal between the EU and Turkey aimed to curb migrant flows. The arrangement led to the closure of the Balkan route. Under the deal illegal migrants crossing the sea to Greece were to be returned to Turkey. In exchange Turkey got up to six billion euros in financial support and was offered a more liberal visa policy for Turkish citizens travelling to Europe (if all conditions of the agreement were met) (European Commission [2016](#)).

This led to countries along the Balkan route closing their borders. Thousands of migrants became caught within the borders of individual countries and gathered in camps all over the region. In pursuit of their end destination, many migrants paid human traffickers to lead them north, which resulted in increased corruption linked to the management of migrant camps (Mandić [2017b](#)). Migrants had to rely completely on human traffickers and were exposed to police violence (Arsenijevic et al. [2017](#)). Moreover, when it was announced that the Balkan route had been closed, the media largely stopped providing news on it, and thus the migrants who had been caught in limbo found themselves trapped in an even darker place (Knezevic [2017](#)). The EU was heavily criticised for engaging with Turkey's authoritarian regime and for causing humanitarian crises in the EU's vicinity.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans have been especially affected by the illegal practices human traffickers used during the migration crisis because the population had experienced mass displacement, ethnic cleansing and state-promoted violence against civilians in its recent history. The crisis affected cooperation between the Balkan states, and the nationalist rhetoric of ethnic purity re-emerged. It also reinvigorated Euroscepticism and worsened the relations of the Western Balkan countries with both the EU institutions and certain of the larger member states, notably Germany, because of these member states' self-interested management of the crisis. All these elements of strain and suspicion have to be considered against a backdrop of the recurring economic crises, youth unemployment and stagnant economies. Taken together—in a context in which the EU's eastward enlargement has largely ground to halt, anti-elite populism is on the rise (as one sees in Brexit, for example) and autocratic rule is being de facto legitimised (Erdogan's soft power is an example)—all these factors make for an explosive mix. In comparison with a few years ago, membership of the exclusive club of the EU is today less attractive to the Western Balkan states, some of which are starting to turn their heads towards new partners, such as Russia (Bechev [2017](#)). Countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which rely on Russia for oil and gas, are especially sensitive to Russia's encouragement of anti-Western and nationalistic narratives. In 2016 Serbia's military conducted more than ten times as many exercises with Russian troops as it did with Western forces (Greider [2017](#)). Thus, the region risks being transformed again into a 'powder keg'.

One reason for this is that the EU's grand ideas have been fading. Another is the EU's inability to provide European-level management of its south-eastern Mediterranean frontier, including the Western Balkans. Conversely, the Balkan migration crisis and its controversial solution show that it is high time to apply to the European frontier region a single, integrated strategy for managing the EU's external borders and migration issues—a strategy based on a common European policy. The mainland and the Mediterranean Sea should be kept together by opening humanitarian corridors for refugees and possibly revising overly harsh visa policies for economic migrants. It is irrational for countries to push back migrants at their terrestrial borders, which leads to migrants appealing to human traffickers, and, at the same time, to support search-and-rescue operations at sea in response to 'accidents' caused by human traffickers. The current fractured and ad hoc approach to migration management should give way to more serious and shared attempts at tackling common challenges. These new attempts should ensure that other regional and global players are included, for example, Russia, China and the Arab states. In any case, both smugglers and migrants see the European territory as having one frontier, and it is time for the EU to share this vision.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Arsenijevic, J., Schillberg, E., Ponthieu, A., Malvisi, L., Argenziano, S., Waeil, A., Elrahman, A., Zamatto, F., Burroughs, S., Severy, N., Hebting, C., de Vigne, B., Harries, A. D., & Zachariah, R. (2017). A crisis of protection and safe passage: Violence experienced by migrants/refugees travelling along the Western Balkan corridor to Northern Europe. *Conflict and Health*, 11(6). <https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-017-0107-z>. Accessed 2 October 2017.
- Bechev, D. (2011). The EU as a regional hegemon? From eastern enlargement to the European neighbourhood policy. In G. Noutcheva, K. Pomorska, & G. Bosse (eds.), *Values vs. security? The choice for the EU and its neighbours* (pp. 25–45). Manchester: MUP.
- Bechev, D. (2017). *Rival power: Russia's influence in Southeast Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bechev, D., & Nicolaidis, K. (eds.). (2010). *Mediterranean frontiers: Borders, conflict and memory in a transnational world*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Bonifazi, C., Crisci, M., Marini, C., & Sanmartin Orti, A. (2014). The Balkans and the EU: Recent trends of a Mediterranean migration. *South East European Journal of Political Science*, 2(3), 110–25.

Cocco, E. (2013). *The evolving role of the Adriatic space in the Mediterranean: Challenges and opportunities*. German Marshall Fund of the United States. Mediterranean Paper Series no. 23.

Donnan, H. (2015). The anthropology of borders. In J. D. Wright (ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences* (pp. 760–65). Oxford: Elsevier.

Düvell, F. (2012). Transit migration: A blurred and politicised concept. *Population, Space and Place*, 18, 415–27.

European Commission. (2016). Implementing the EU–Turkey statement. Fact Sheet, 8 December. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-4321_en.htm. Accessed 3 October 2017.

European Western Balkans archives. (2017). *Balkan migration route: Ongoing story*. 22 February. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/02/22/balkan-migration-route-ongoing-story/>. Accessed 2 October 2017.

Finnian, J. (2017). Blocked in the Balkans: The refugees that Europe won't allow in. *The Guardian*, 8 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/08/eu-refugees-serbia-afghanistan-taliban>. Accessed 2 October 2017.

Green, S. (2005). *Notes from the Balkans: Locating marginality and ambiguity on the Greek–Albanian Border*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Greider, A. (2017). Outsourcing migration management: The role of the Western Balkans in the European refugee crisis. Migration Policy Institute (website), 17 August. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/outsourcing-migration-management-western-balkans-europes-refugee-crisis>. Accessed 2 October 2017.

Ivakhiv, A. (2006). Stoking the heart of (a certain) Europe: Crafting hybrid identities in the Ukraine–EU Borderlands. *Spaces of Identities*, 6(1), 11–44.

Knezevic, G. (2017). Is Balkan sympathy for refugees a thing of the past? Radio Free Europe Radio Free Liberty (website), 11 April. <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkan-sympathy-for-refugees-running-out/28424031.html>. Accessed 2 October 2017.

Kogovšek Šalamon, N. (2016). Asylum systems in the Western Balkan countries: Current issues. *International Migrations*, 54, 151–63.

Kotevska, B. (2010). How to stop pretending and start cooperating: The impact of the European Union on regional cooperation in the Western Balkans—The focus on migration. *Politicka Mislja* 6. https://www.academia.edu/29195497/How_to_Stop_Pretending_and_Start_Cooperating_The_Impact_of_the_European_Union_On_Regional_Cooperation_in_the_Western_Balkans_-_Focus_on_Migration. Accessed 2 October 2017.

- Mandić, D. (2017a). Anatomy of a refugee wave: Forced migration on the Balkan route as two processes. *Europe Now Journal*, 5 January. <http://www.europenowjournal.org/2017/01/04/anatomy-of-a-refugee-wave-forced-migration-on-the-balkan-route-as-two-processes/>. Accessed 2 October 2017.
- Mandić, D. (2017b). Trafficking and Syrian refugee smuggling: Evidence from the Balkan route. *Social Inclusion*, 5(2), 28–38.
- Neag, M.-A. (2015). New EU provisional migration solutions strain relations in the Western Balkans, Central Europe. *Balkananalysis*, 30 September. <http://www.balkananalysis.com/serbia/2015/09/30/new-eu-provisional-migration-solutions-strain-relations-in-the-western-balkans-central-europe/>. Accessed 2 October 2017.
- Papadopoulos, A. (2007). Migration and human security in the Balkans (editorial). *Migration Letters*, 4(2), 95–100.
- Sardelic, J. (2017). The Western Balkan route: A new form of forced migration governance in Europe? *Green European Journal*, 31 August. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-western-balkan-route-a-new-form-of-forced-migration-governance-in-europe/>. Accessed 2 October 2017.
- Strassoldo, R. (1982). Boundaries in sociological theory: A reassessment. In R. Strassoldo & G. Delli Zotti (eds.), *Cooperation and conflict in border areas* (pp. 245–71). Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Topaloglou, L. (2009). The role and nature of borders. COST Action IS0803 Eastbordnet, Working paper. http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/documents/Topaloglou_The_rle_andnature_of_borders_090414.pdf. Accessed 5 July 2017.
- Uvalić, M. (2002). Regional cooperation and the enlargement of the European Union: Lessons learned? *International Political Science Review*, 23(3), 319–33.
- Vathi, Z. (2015). *Addressing migration of unaccompanied minors from and through the Western Balkans*. International Organisation for Migration, Regional Report 2015. <http://www.albania.iom.int/publications/reports/IOM%20Regional%20Report%20on%20UAMs%20in%20Western%20Balkans.pdf>. Accessed 2 October 2017.
- Weber, B. (2017). *The EU–Turkey refugee deal and the not quite closed Balkan route*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Dialogue Southeast Europe. June.
- Wilson, T. M., & Donnan, H. (eds.). (1998). *Border identities: Nation and state at international frontiers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittrock, P., & Elmer, C. (2016). Was haben wir schon geschafft? *Spiegelonline*, 31 August. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/angela-merkels-wir-schaffen-das-bilanz-eines-fluechtlingsjahres-a-1110075.html>. Accessed 3 October 2017.



Emilio Cocco is a Professor and sociologist of international relations at the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Teramo, where he teaches Globalisation and International Development, and at the American University of Rome, where he teaches in the Media Program and in the Food Studies Program. His research interests revolve around the sociology of borders and frontiers, with a particular focus on the Balkans and the Mediterranean region. He is also engaged in sociological investigations of the oceans and of maritime spaces.