

## **The 'refugee crisis' and its transformative impact on EU-Western Balkans relations**

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# ***The 'refugee crisis' and its transformative impact on EU-Western Balkans Relations***

***Jonathan Webb***

## **Abstract**

The EU's relations with the countries of the Western Balkans are traditionally characterised by a set of stable relations and power dynamics. While the impact of the 'migration crisis' on EU migration policy has been examined, comparatively little attention has been placed on the social construction of the crisis and its impact on EU external relations. Specifically, there remains a lack of scholarship ascertaining the relationship between the framing of the crisis as a security threat, and EU policy change towards non-EU countries in Southeast Europe. To address these gaps, this article explores to what extent the securitisation of the crisis led to policy changes and the consequence of these changes on EU relations with the countries of Macedonia and Serbia. It demonstrates how in exchange for their cooperation with the EU to address the crisis, the Western Balkans governments extracted significant political concessions from the EU. Changes in policy and practice by the EU further enabled Macedonia and Serbia to justify concessions from the EU. This is argued to represent a continued shift in the relationship between the EU and Western Balkans countries, all be it one driven by the spiralling securitisation of the crisis.

## **Keywords**

EU-Western Balkans relations; refugee crisis; EU external relations; migration; securitisation

## **Introduction**

As the other articles in this special issue have suggested, securitisation and migration politics are closely intertwined. The escalation or de-escalation of securitisation can move migration policy and politics in different directions. This article explores this dynamic, while also focussing on the relationship between policy change and relations between states. A central question is posed: How did the securitisation of the refugee crisis affect EU external relations with the transit countries of Macedonia and Serbia?

The securitisation literature suggests that as an issue becomes securitised, the way in which actors understand an issue and formulate their interests in relation to an issue changes (Buzan and Waever 2003; Stritzel 2007). From this perspective, as the securitisation of migration accelerates, different actors will contribute to the

securitisation or desecuritisation of the issue, readjust their interests and change the way they interact with one another (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002; McDonald 2008). This article intuitively builds on the distinct theory of spiralling securitisation outlined in the introduction to this special issue (Bello 2022) and applies it to the refugee crisis that developed from 2015 in Southeast Europe.

From 2015 to 2016, the Western Balkan countries saw large numbers of refugees crossing their borders. In total, Serbia received the second highest number after Greece with 596,000 arrivals, followed by Macedonia with 413,000 (Lilyanova 2016, 3). Yet, despite this, there is a shortage of scholarship examining the impact and implications of the crisis on relations between the EU and these EU Candidate States. Addressing this gap is important, given both the lack of scholarship on the crisis in the region and because our understanding of these events and the policy decisions made during the crisis are likely to be influenced by how the crisis was framed (Geddes and HadjAbdou 2018).

The analysis in this article addresses this gap and demonstrates that as the issue of migration was increasingly securitised within the EU, an external response was formulated to limit migration and reinforce the EU's external border. Methodologically, this article uses process tracing methods to ascertain how the construction of a securitisation narrative within the EU resulted in policy changes towards the countries of Macedonia and Serbia. These Western Balkan countries are selected as cases because they were the two main non-EU Member States in the Western Balkans that were tasked with securing the EU's external borders. A range of EU policy documents dated from 2014 to 2017 were analysed to understand how the framing of the crisis changed. In addition, news articles from both EU news sources and the Western Balkans countries, as well as other reports and policy statements documenting the crisis by international organisations, were examined. In total, over 60 documents were analysed. 14 semi-structured interviews are cited in this article, among a total number of 20 conducted with key policy actors. These interviews were used to further elaborate how the securitisation narrative developed, how it informed and framed policy, and ultimately how this securitisation resulted in changing relations between the EU and these countries. This ultimately resulted in a more political relationship emerging between the EU and the Western Balkans countries that was focused largely on resolving the crisis and less on fundamental reforms associated with the EU accession process.

## **The construction of a 'refugee crisis', migration governance and EU external relations**

The wide ranging political consequences of Europe's so-called 'migration crisis' have led to a series of proactive migration policy changes within the European Union (EU) (Slominski and Trauner 2018; Trauner 2016). One area where there

remains a relative absence of analysis is the ‘refugee crisis’<sup>1</sup> in Southeast Europe and its impact on EU-Western Balkans relations. Traditionally, relations between the EU and the countries in this region have been defined by their asymmetry and the leverage the EU can exert over its regional partners (Schimmelfennig 2005; Vachudova 2005). However, recent scholarship has suggested that this relationship is far more political and that countries in the region have in fact been capable of shaping the process in a way that allows them to avoid undertaking fundamental reforms, if they cooperate to resolve key problems in the region as perceived by the EU (Zweers 2019).

While the impact of the crisis on the Western Balkans and its relations with the EU remains underexamined in the literature, existing scholarship supports a view that the crisis could have further transformed the relationship between the EU and Candidate States in the region. Existing scholarship suggests that the wider impact of the refugee crisis on the EU adversely affected EU solidarity, resulting in its actions being defined by its interest in resolving this crisis (Bello 2017). This change would reflect an even broader process of migration policy interacting with and shaping economic and security agreements between the EU and neighbouring countries (Geddes 2005; Ferrero-Waldner 2006). This includes countries in the Southern Mediterranean (Carrera, Den Hertog, and Parkin 2012) the Middle East and North Africa (Seeberg 2013), as well as Southeast Europe.

An analysis of EU Commission press statements on the crisis from 2014 to 2017 demonstrates how the crisis became increasingly constructed as a security threat to the EU. Statements towards the end 2015 show a continued focus on providing EU countries with financial assistance to accommodate and integrate refugees (European Commission 2015d). However, from 2016, this narrative changed. The crisis first became an event that needed to be managed, primarily through agreements with partner countries external to the EU (European Commission 2015f). However, alongside this, a narrative emerged that portrayed the refugee crisis as an external threat to the EU, and one that needed to be decisively dealt with beyond the EU’s borders (European Commission 2015e). The impetus on migration management slowly shifted from the EU towards partner countries, who the EU believed were best positioned to tackle the ‘root causes’ of the crisis that threatened the security and stability of the EU (European Commission 2015e, 2016a, 2016e).

Where there is literature on the crisis, scholars have been concerned with examining the crisis in terms of its impact on individual migrants and refugees (Arsenijević et al. 2017), the implications of the crisis for further European integration (Scipioni 2018), and the political as well as media rhetoric surrounding the crisis (Collyer and King 2016). However, there is a notable absence of scholarship examining the narratives of the crisis and how it affected EU-Western Balkan relations. Examining this region is important given there is a well-established body of literature demonstrating how the EU has structured its neighbourhood relations around the issue of migration (Boswell 2003; Lavenex 2006). Scholarship has shown how the

construction of imaginaries and the creation of the EU's neighbourhood, have resulted in the externalisation of the EU's borders. In effect, this moves the responsibility of managing the EU's borders beyond its geographical limits and on to countries beyond its border (Bialasiewicz 2012; Scott, Celata, and Coletti 2019). However, often these accounts have not included the Western Balkans region in its analysis.

The transit countries of the Western Balkans have a protracted relationship with the EU. The EU's role in encouraging these countries to confront post-conflict legacies means that the promotion of human rights and transitional justice have been a key feature of EU-Western Balkans relations (Elbasani 2008; Bieber 2011). This has manifested in a policy framework that has focused on offering the countries of the region a credible prospect of EU membership, in exchange for transposing the EU *acquis* (Vachudova 2014). Similarly, when it comes to migration policy, it has traditionally been the transposition of the EU *acquis* that has determined Candidate State policy, given their exclusion from more reactive policy-making forums on migration policy (Byrne, Noll, and Vedsted-Hansen 2004).

As a consequence of substantive engagement between the EU and regional actors, the external relations of the countries in the region are orientated towards the EU and the prospect of EU membership (Elbasani 2013; Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit 2012). Consequently, all countries in the region hold EU membership aspirations and many have begun accession negotiations (European Commission 2015b).

Despite a strong body of literature demonstrating the EU's capacity to use various incentives to achieve policy outcomes in EU Candidate States (Bechev 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004), the literature on reverse conditionality suggests that initial cooperation that appears to favour the EU can be 'reversed' once a partner country in the EU's neighbourhood acquires a strategic position and is capable of leveraging its own policy interests (Cassarino 2007, 192). There remains however limited analysis of how the refugee crisis fits into the broader pattern of EU-Western Balkans relations and if the crisis did in fact allow for this reverse conditionality to occur. This analysis is important given scholars have noted a new form of political conditionality at play towards the Candidate States in the Western Balkans.

This new conditionality shares many of the same features of conditionality proposed by earlier scholars, but instead of being rewarded for transposing the EU *acquis*, political incumbents are offered political legitimacy in exchange for cooperating with the EU to resolve contemporary crises inflicting the EU (Zweers 2019; Kmezić 2020). Indeed, recent accounts have suggested that the refugee crisis in the region has resulted in the disintegration of the region from the European project as it once again becomes imagined as a frontier zone (Cocco 2017). There remains a need

however for further scholarship to example how this might have evolved in practice and the precise impact this crisis has had on regional relations.

The increasingly politicised and security driven nature of EU-Western Balkans relations can be located in a broader shift towards strategic non-compliance with transposing the EU *acquis*, which is typically overlooked in the Europeanization literature. Where EU rules and norms are more clearly articulated and consistently promoted, non-compliance has been less likely (Noutcheva 2009; Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit 2012). In cases of ambiguity however, existing scholarship demonstrates the Western Balkan Candidates States have resisted the EU's transformative power (Bieber 2011; Rajkovic 2012). As such, Candidate States have used ambiguity to make the process more interest driven and avoid fundamental reforms that may be costly to incumbents (Bieber 2011).

The ambiguity in the EU's narrative of the crisis – first as a humanitarian crisis and then as a security threat – may have provided Western Balkan leaders with the opportunity to frame themselves as credible gatekeepers protecting EU security. It may also facilitate non-compliance with the EU's rule of law agenda in exchange for alignment with the EU's border security agenda, because the EU's regional priorities appear less clear and consistent. It is also reasonable to expect that due to the nature of accession negotiations and the need for Candidate States to transpose the EU *acquis*, that any change in EU migration governance will need to be transposed by Candidate States (Huysmans 2000; Lavenex 2001). In sum, the Western Balkans is important not only because it rests at the epicentre of new migratory routes to Europe, but because the region and its actors have a unique and protracted relationship with the EU beyond the context of the crisis.

In sum, the EU has historically been effective at ensuring partner countries work to reduce migration and act as 'gatekeepers', in exchange for different forms of assistance (Adepoju, Van Noorloos, and Zoomers 2010; Carrera, Den Hertog, and Parkin 2012, 5; Düvell 2012, 417–418; Paoletti 2010, 21). However, recent studies suggest that reverse conditionality can operate and provide non-EU countries with an opportunity to leverage desirable outcomes from the EU in exchange for policing their perceived frontiers (Cassarino 2007; Cocco 2017). Coupled with narrative ambiguity, this could provide an opportunity for Candidate States in the region to use new framing to achieve their interests and avoid implementing fundamental rule of law reforms.

The following section examines the theory of securitisation outlined elsewhere in this Special Issue and proposes how this securitisation might in practice reverse the conditionality between the EU and Macedonia and Serbia. This addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing more detailed analysis of the crisis in the Western Balkans and how the construction of events as a security crisis affected relations between the EU and countries in the region. At the same time, it

complements developments in the literature that note a shift from the EU as the main leveraging actor to show how smaller countries can exert leverage over the EU.

### **Towards a theory of escalating securitisation and relation change**

Having established a pre-existing relationship between the EU and Western Balkans countries and having identified the refugee crisis as a key event, it is possible to anticipate how EU-Western Balkans relations changed in the context of the crisis. First the emergence of a salient discourse of the crisis as a threat to the stability and security of the EU shaped the position of EU actors. Securitisation theory outlines the importance of discourse in shaping the way actors understand and respond to an issue (Buzan and Waever 2003; Stritzel 2007). When migration is increasingly talked about as a threat, it reinforces a hostile narrative and it becomes increasingly difficult for alternative narratives to be constructed (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002; McDonald 2008). The framing of the refugee crisis as a threat to EU security and stability intersected with facts, policies, practices, other narratives and techniques, to intensify the securitisation of the refugee crisis (Bello 2017, 62). The securitisation of the crisis undermined solidarity within the EU. For example, the hostility shown by many Central and Eastern European Member States to a proposed quota system has corresponded with the emergence of an increasingly hostile discourse towards refugees and migrants, and the representation of the crisis as a threat to Member State interests (Falkner 2016; Geddes and Scholten 2016, 85–86; Trauner 2016). Securitisation can lead to prejudice and negatively impact the formation of solidarity processes that are indispensable to EU integration (Bello 2017). This securitisation process is proposed to explain the emergence of a new border regime, which was designed to address the threat through external border enforcement. To assess the relationship between securitisation and action, analytical focus is placed primarily on the EU's collective response. However, the role that individual Member States have played in framing the crisis is referenced where appropriate.

Building on a theory of securitisation, it is anticipated that to reduce internal contestation and resolve the crisis, the EU tried to restrict entry into the EU through the Western Balkans route. In this case, the strategic approach of state actors in the Western Balkans was to reinforce the securitisation of the crisis. Recognising an opportunity to gain from the crisis and extract financial and political rewards from the EU, Western Balkans actors actively contributed to the construction of the crisis as a threat to EU stability and security. This was done by perpetuating a discourse of the crisis as a threat. Having perpetuated the crisis narrative, regional leaders presented their cooperation as an appropriate solution to stem the crisis. This cooperation was contingent on a relaxing of accession conditions relating to rule of law reform, and greater political support and inclusion of regional leaders in EU decision-making forums. From this perspective, it is also proposed that the narrative of the crisis as a threat changed the dispositions of EU actors, making them more



susceptible to engaging with Serbia and Macedonia to help stem the crisis, allowing these countries to further reverse conditionality towards the EU.

The EU's reliance on the Western Balkans countries to help resolve the crisis allowed Macedonia and Serbia to use the narrative as a form of leverage by enforcing a new border regime, in exchange for rewards. State actors in the Macedonia and Serbia recognised that the crisis allowed them to exert leverage over the EU. This is because the EU's response to the crisis was contingent on effective cooperation with them to enforce a new border regime. In this regard, it is speculated that the EU was prepared to tolerate poor compliance or non-compliance in other areas of reform expected from Candidate States, in exchange for them acting as gatekeepers. Whether this occurred is ascertained through interviews with key informants who provided insight into how EU actors viewed these changes and the extent to which the EU was prepared to tolerate non-compliance with key rule of law criteria in exchange for these countries acting as gatekeepers.

The following sections demonstrate that in exchange for securing the EU's external borders, the Western Balkans countries were offered a range of rewards. Crucially, the provision of these rewards stem from the securitisation of the crisis and the impact this had on EU solidarity.

## **The refugee crisis and the EU's response**

The first signs of EU action occurred in April 2015 at the height of the crisis. An extraordinary European Council meeting was originally called to address the deteriorating situation in the Mediterranean. Consequently, EU action to limit and suppress the movement of people was devised and a raft of reforms launched to enhance the operational capacity of FRONTEX, rapidly transpose the Common European Asylum System in Member States and enhance Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (European Commission 2015c). These policy actions reflected an increased concern within the EU about the crisis, its securitisation and the subsequent need enhance and enforce a securitised border regime (Neal 2009). These actions, which occurred in response to the emergence of a discourse that framed the crisis as a threat to EU stability (Heisbourg 2015), resulted in new forms of engagement between the EU and Western Balkans countries. This changing dynamic fits a broader pattern of EU reliance on non-EU countries to enforce its border regime (Geddes 2015; Bialasiewicz 2012). Increasingly, the Western Balkans countries were relied on to enforce the EU's border regime where previously, this had not been the case.

Despite the focus of the EU initially being centred on the Mediterranean, large numbers of people making their way across land routes through the Western Balkans further exacerbated existing political tensions and anti-migration sentiment within the EU. This necessitated the construction of a new external policy. On 8 October 2015, an Eastern Mediterranean-Western Balkans Route Conference was held

(Council of the European Union 2015a). This was the first direct engagement between the countries of the Western Balkans and the EU to address the crisis. It made several recommendations that impacted the migration governance systems of the transit countries. This included recommendations to enhance humanitarian assistance, improve reception and accommodation facilities, and improve coordination between regional actors by enhancing information flows (Council of the European Union 2015b, 5–6). However, these policy changes accelerated in tandem with the emergence of a narrative of the crisis as a threat. Consequently, political contestation grew in EU Member States towards the crisis and the perceived influx of refugees (Allen et al. 2017, 12–13).

Initially, the EU sought to maintain a balanced response to the crisis that ensured humanitarian standards were upheld and that EU external borders were successfully controlled. However, events that transpired on the ground between 2015 and 2016 were considered by key interlocutors to poorly uphold humanitarian standards. In contrast, EU actors believed that policy actions helped manage the flow of refugees and limited the crisis' impact on EU security and stability.<sup>2</sup> During this period, there was an increased focus on border securitisation and a redistribution of resources designed to aid transit countries in reducing migration. Key political actors, particularly in Germany, sought to shore up their domestic power by responding to the crisis (Bulmer and Joseph 2016, 731). While at first policy responses were more open, they eventually focussed on suppressing movement (Geddes and Scholten 2016, 96). Limiting migration required engaging with the Western Balkans countries. High-level discussions between EU Member State officials and leaders in the Western Balkans resulted in a joint statement on migration following the Western Balkans summit between regional leaders and the EU (France Diplomatie 2016).<sup>3</sup> This narrative was subsequently internalised and filtered down to border officials and actors on the ground who subsequently changed their practice.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the EU's response, two types of change are considered to have occurred in the context of the crisis: formal change and decisions made through informal venues. As the crisis progressed, decisions made informally through bilateral relations, helped the EU and partner countries to circumvent legal 'grey zones' (Bauböck 2018; Niemann and Zaun 2018). New border practices were replicated inside and outside the EU and were subsequently legitimised, even when they were not formally mandated. These practices were informal because they were not legitimised by EU rules and norms. However, it is important to note that often formal EU rules and norms on migration management have been inconsistently implemented (Léonard 2010). In this case however, this change is notable as this disassociation between formal rules and norms and practices was not previously widespread in the Western Balkans before the construction of the crisis as a threat to stability. The perpetuation of new practices that included illegal pushbacks, abuse of refugees and forcibly preventing people from crossing borders, was not previously a

feature of the region's border regime. This informal change led to a change in relations because it made it acceptable to deviate from EU rules and norms that were previously used to structure EU relations with Macedonia and Serbia through the EU accession process.

In terms of a change in practice, reports on the border between Bulgaria and Serbia documented a long-running and persistent pattern of abuse towards refugees including exhortation, abuse and forced deportation in violation of international law (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2016; Human Rights Watch 2015, 2016a). Increasingly, illegal pushbacks or forcibly restricting entry across borders became widespread (European Parliament 2016). None of these practices were consistently documented prior to the crisis. Despite the sustained documentation of such abuse, EU action to prevent abuse, condemn perpetrators and adhere to its humanitarian values, did not occur. This suggests that as the crisis grew, there was a further prioritisation of border control over adherence international human rights norms.

Further analysis demonstrates that the normative framework guiding EU border practices substantially changed with the onset of the crisis. Border abuses were documented on the Hungarian border (Human Rights Watch 2016b) and the Croatian border (Human Rights Watch 2017; Oxfam 2017). One interviewee argued that the EU's continued divergence away from humanitarian principles and representation of the crisis as a security issue was being noted in Serbia where small-scale cases of abuse had occurred. More problematically however, this interviewee believed that the deteriorating human rights focus of the EU had excused the Western Balkans countries from making human rights an essential part of their migration governance systems.<sup>5</sup> These changes transformed the way the Western Balkans actors understood migration management and responded to the crisis. Ultimately, Member State deviation from established norms legitimised the deviation of Western Balkans actors from those same norms. This legitimisation further emboldened Western Balkans actors to forcibly exert their agency and deter entry across their borders. Intentional pushbacks on the MacedoniaGreek border provides a strong example of this action and the lack of EU response further legitimised this forceful approach (Amnesty 2015).

This reinforced the strategic component of EU-Western Balkans relations. Regional actors were increasingly able to dismiss any focus the EU placed on human rights over political realities during their interactions as a claim of double standards.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the EU was not seen as a 'normative power' driven by a desire to promote fundamental human rights norms (Manners 2002). Instead, it was perceived as an actor driven by political interests and security concerns. Cooperation between the EU and Western Balkans countries was increasingly framed around addressing the crisis and the threat it posed to EU stability. The relationship between the two sets of actors was thus increasingly reinforced by interests deriving from the belief that there was a pragmatic need to prevent further movement across the EU's border.

A commitment to humanitarian norms and values increasingly played a diminished role.

This securitisation turn was further legitimised in practice through the rushed planning of a new asylum processing system. In November 2015, the EU provided additional support to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Western Balkans region to support up to 200,000 refugees (European Commission 2016d). While the UNHCR welcome the additional resources, they also pointed to some of the more problematic outcomes of the EU's strategy. For example, one interviewee argued that the EU's focus on preventing the movement of people and ensuring the efficient processing of asylum applications could not be implemented in line with international standards. The interviewee argued it was unfeasible in the current context as the Western Balkans countries did not have the capacity to accommodate large number of refugees or process asylum applications. They argued that if the EU insisted on these changes, they would sacrifice the construction of robust asylum procedures, in exchange for ensuring regional governments helped enforce their new border regime.<sup>7</sup>

Another interviewee pointed to the actions of neighbouring EU Member States, including Bulgaria and Croatia and emphasised how their treatment of refugees set a precedent for circumventing establish human rights norms in the region.<sup>8</sup> An examination of the events and interview responses from key actors in the region demonstrates a clear shift by the EU and its Member States away from principles of human rights, to enforcing stricter border controls and suppressing migration. This was communicated to the countries of the Western Balkans. The ability of Macedonia and Serbia to prevent further entry of refugees into the EU was perceived as important for diffusing domestic discontent that was placing pressure on EU governments.<sup>9</sup> The permissibility of regional actors to abandon a migration governance framework that was focussed on human rights reflects not only an erosion of the EU's normative legitimacy, but also an increased reliance on external countries to enforce its border regime.

Over the course of the crisis, the EU sought to ensure that the countries of the Western Balkans would align with its deterrence policy. Before the EU formulated a coherent policy response to the crisis, the Western Balkans countries had typically pursued a laissez-faire approach to migration. However, as the crisis generated pressure within the EU, the EU sought to construct a policy response in cooperation with these countries that would limit movement into the EU and diffuse domestic contestation. Because Serbia and Macedonia are not EU Member States and lack robust asylum systems, their general strategy was to move refugees onwards to countries that had the capacity to accommodate larger numbers of refugees (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016). As the crisis developed however, the EU explicitly encouraged refugees to seek asylum in Serbia and Macedonia to relieve the flow of people seeking entry into the EU (Peshkopia 2015, 175–176). To ensure these

countries would comply with this policy and that they had the capacity to accommodate refugees, increased financial incentives were provided (European Commission 2016d). Furthermore, two interviewees believed that leaders in Macedonia and Serbia helped co-construct a narrative of the crisis as a threat to EU stability in the hope of extracting further material and political rewards from the EU.<sup>10</sup> This is also reflected in the statements of key politicians, with the Serbian Prime Minister for example speaking of Serbia's desire to 'protect Serbia and Europe from another migration wave.' In adopting the language of the crisis and perpetuating a public discourse of refugee inflows as a threat to stability, the notion of crisis was reinforced (B92 2016d):

*It is clear that the EU functions excellently in times of peace and prosperity, but not in an emergency situation ... The times when European security could be defended at its external frontiers with the Middle East and north Africa are long gone. Now, European security has to be defended within Europe itself- Gjorge Ivanov, then president of Macedonia (National Post 2016).*

The political salience of the crisis and the paramount concern to stop the movement of people into the EU also afforded the Western Balkan countries with a powerful 'bargaining chip' in their current accession negotiations with the EU. Regional elites strategically emphasised their compliance with the EU to enhance their power within Serbia and Macedonia and improve their regional standing. Interviews conducted with public officials in the region suggested that in exchange for assisting with the crisis, leverage was exerted to gain political concessions from the EU. This included a reduced focus on the transposition of key EU rule of law acquis, as well as an agreement to increasingly include the leadership of Macedonia and Serbia in the European Agenda on Migration.<sup>11</sup> Several high-profile visits by EU leaders to the Western Balkans countries and public praise for the leadership of these countries in tackling the crisis also improved the domestic legitimacy of PM Gruevski in Macedonia and PM Vucić in Serbia.<sup>12</sup> One interviewee referred to how refugees had been treated in Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary. They argued that the actions of these EU Member States explicitly violated the humanitarian principles preached by EU negotiators during accession negotiations. An interviewee from the UNHCR argued that this had been seized upon by politicians as an opportunity to exert rare leverage over the EU in exchange for addressing the crisis.<sup>13</sup> This leverage was exerted most profoundly in Macedonia, where the government's compliance with the EU's agenda was actively used to divert attention away from its on-going democratic crisis (Spasov 2016). More generally however, a position emerged from regional actors that their adequate treatment of refugees should be held as an example of their readiness to assume EU membership. This position was adopted to help them bargain for a relaxation of accession conditions. In the words of one interviewee: 'if we aren't allowed in the EU [for how we treat refugees], look at Hungary!'<sup>14</sup>

Political considerations that occurred in response to the crisis reflect the interests of key actors and the way in which they evaluated their positions in the context of the

crisis. The rhetoric of the Western Balkans leaders communicated their belief that they were acting in defence of the EU and securing its external borders (B92 2016b; Gruevski 2015). These statements also reflect that regional actors recognised the crisis provided them with the opportunity to restructure their relations with the EU. From the EU side, there was a need to find a response that halted growing discontent within the EU surrounding the issue of refugee migration (Vertovec 2017, 1577). From the Serbian and Macedonian perspective, the crisis was an opportunity to gain important material rewards and political concessions from the EU. This included both financial support to suppress migration and reduced scrutiny from the EU regarding rule of law violations in Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, this process began with the framing of the crisis as a threat and escalated to the point where actions on the ground and policy decisions changed. These changes required a change in EU relations with Macedonia and Serbia and the deepening of cooperation between the two sets of actors.

At the beginning of 2016, the consequences of the EU's response to the crisis were beginning to emerge. It became apparent that the EU's policy response had a broader impact beyond the way in which migration is managed in the region. It had also begun to transform regional relations between the EU and the Western Balkan countries. It did so by fostering the increased inclusion of Macedonia and Serbia in EU decisionmaking. It also changed the focus of the EU's accession negotiations with these countries. In terms of their increased inclusion, the Western Balkan countries were included in EU intergovernmental discussions on migration (EEAS 2015). One interviewee was keen to state how increased concerns about migration and refugee flows could be reflected onto the accession process.<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, the countries accession negotiations were used as an ad-hoc instrument for channelling funds to address the emerging crisis. This change is also reflected in the focus of accession progress reports. Enlargement strategy reports from 2015 to 2016 clearly reflect an increased focus on border management and control. For example, the 2016 enlargement strategy outlined how the EU's 'comprehensive and rights-sensitive' approach to the crisis had effectively closed the Western Balkans route. However, continuous action would be needed to monitor the route and prevent further entry into the EU (European Commission 2016c, 4–5). This contrasts sharply with previous enlargement strategy papers. For example, prior to the crisis in 2014, the sole issue structuring EU-Western Balkans relations was the 'strict but fair conditionality, established criteria and the principle of own merit' (European Commission, 2014, 1). In terms of mentions alone, the reports from 2016 mention migration 16 times (European Commission 2016c), the report from 2015 mentioned migration nine times (European Commission 2015a) and the report from 2014 seven times (European Commission 2014). These references reflect the EU's evolving concern for border control and migration management, as well as an acknowledgement of the role played by the Western Balkans countries in its increasingly securitised border regime. Restricting movement through the Western

Balkans route thus became a key factor influencing the EU's approach to the region and its regional relations.

The representation of the crisis as a threat reinforced a belief that it could destabilise the EU. Policy changes were thus consequential of the way EU publics and politicians reacted to the refugee crisis. Member State governments responded to social discord and constructed a border regime with the Western Balkans countries to reinforce the EU's border and reduce domestic contestation (Laffan 2016, 922–924). This was outlined in discussions with one interlocutor, who believed that the crisis required reassessing EU Western Balkans relations and re-engaging with regional leaders to construct a common solution. Prior to this, the EU's regional policy had been orientated around accession negotiations. The prospect of accession was perceived to be distant and for many European diplomats, the Western Balkans was 'not on their radar'.<sup>17</sup> However, because the crisis was construed as a salient security issue, the EU increasingly consulted regional state actors and relied on them to enforce its new border regime.

The commitment of the EU to end the refugee crisis through the enforcement of a new border regime is also visible when the material concessions provided to the Western Balkans countries are examined. Material incentives emboldened regional actors by supporting their belief that power relations were being reconfigured. The type of material support given to the countries was indicative of the new highly securitised border regime which was to be enforced. The crisis led to additional aid disbursements and the relaxation of political scrutiny on key EU accession issues, primarily rule of law reform (Wunsch, Dimitrov, and Cvijic 2016). In terms of material support, Serbia received €7 million to assist government actors and NGOs in responding to the crisis. The European Investment Bank contributed a further €5 million to the Migrants and Refugee Fund (MRF), which sought to improve the living conditions of refugees and migrants in reception centres (European Western Balkans 2016). Similarly, Macedonia received €4.4 million from the EU to provide assistance at transit points and immediate humanitarian aid (European Commission 2016b). This support was provided despite evidence the Macedonian authorities were seeking to deter, disperse and pushback refugees entering its borders (Nenov 2016). By 2017, both countries received over €21.74 million in assistance to respond to the crisis (European Commission 2016b). Furthermore, the government of Serbia has also used the crisis to rhetorically press the EU for further funding (B92 2015). EU assistance has not been purely humanitarian and both countries have been in receipt of equipment to control their borders and suppress the movement of peoples. This equipment included SUV vehicles, quad bikes and security equipment to help prevent border crossings from neighbouring countries (B92 2016c; EURACTIV 2016; European Western Balkans 2017).

While these material resources are a fraction of the EU's outlay in external aid, they are significant in the context of the Western Balkans. New sources of funding increased the political legitimacy of regional actors. The fact they have gained

materially from the EU is presented as a domestic victory and a sign of their countries increased accession prospects (B92 2016a; de la Baume and Surk 2016). In sum, the cumulative effects of the crisis have had a consequential effect in the Western Balkans. In response to the representation of the crisis as a threat to EU stability, EU-Western Balkans relations place less emphasis on the promotion of humanitarian norms. This is reflected in border practices designed to secure the EU's external border. Increased inclusion in EU-decision-making processes and financial assistance have been important for implementing this changed approach.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the social construction of the crisis had a profound impact on relations between the EU and Western Balkans countries. First, the emergence of a discourse, which framed the crisis as a threat to EU security and stability, sowed discontent within the EU. This threatened EU solidarity and initiated a policy response whereby the EU sought to reinforce its external border with the Western Balkans. Western Balkans actors cooperated with the EU to instigate a new border regime, in exchange for enhanced cooperation and rewards. This allowed the Western Balkan countries to exert leverage over the EU. This represents a further transformation in the relationship between the EU and these countries noted elsewhere from one traditionally defined by the EU's ability to exert power over these countries, to one where these countries are capable of leveraging power of the EU and resisting fundamental rule of law reforms (Zweers 2019; Kmezić 2020).

As the other contributions in this special issue have set out, the securitisation of migration can have a range of political consequences. This article highlighted the relationship between securitisation as a driver of migration politics and international relations. It demonstrated how the escalation of securitisation accelerated a change in policy and ultimately, EU-Western Balkans relations. While this contribution has focussed on the escalation of securitisation, it is important to acknowledge the possibility for de-escalation that was not exhibited in this case. De-escalation would initiate a change in policy and practice that reasserts a more humanitarian approach to migration. Based on the relationship established here, we can also predict that it would readjust relations between the EU and Western Balkans countries. The primary contribution of this article has been to demonstrate the interconnectedness of securitisation, migration politics and international relations. In doing so, it has demonstrated the explanatory value of research which is situated at the intersection between security studies, migration studies and international relations.



## Notes

1. In respect to terminology, while the more general crisis inflicting the EU has been termed the migration crisis, the empirical focus of this paper is on a facet of this crisis, the refugee crisis that occurred in the Western Balkans. A clear majority of people moving through the Western Balkans between 2015 and 2016 were refugees, primarily from Syria.
2. Interviewee A, DG NEAR, Brussels. Interview conducted 6 June 2016.
3. The Western Balkans Summit were initially formulated as a forum for discussing UE Enlargement. With the onset of the crisis, establishing cooperation from the Western Balkans countries to tackle migration became a main priority of the forum. Source: Interview with former policy lead, DG NEAR, Brussels. Interview conducted 3 June 2016.
4. Interview with senior staff from the UNHCR, Belgrade. Interview conducted 28 February 2016.
5. Interviewee with staff, Centre for European Policy, Belgrade. Interview conducted 28 February 2016.
6. Interview with minister, Ministry of Justice, Belgrade. Interview conducted 20 April 2016.
7. Interview with former member of staff, IOM, Belgrade. Interview conducted 30 March 2016.
8. Interviewee with staff, Centre for European Policy, Belgrade. Interview conducted February 2016.
9. Interviewee with MEP, EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee(SAPC), Brussels. Interview conducted 15 June 2016.
10. Interview with two members of staff, Norwegian embassy, Belgrade (embassy also covers activity in Macedonia). Interview conducted 22 April 2016.
11. A series of meetings between leaders from the region and EU officials at the beginning of 2016 resulted in the prioritisation of migration. Although this technically occurred in parallel to a continued focus on rule of law reform, there was a perception amongst EU officials that migration had become the main priority of regional collaboration. Source: Interviewee A, DG NEAR, Brussels. Interview conducted 6 June 2016.
12. Two interviewees, one from the Serbian Ministry of Justice and the other from the Ministry of Interior communicated the expectation that cooperation with the EU on the issue would result in either a loosening of certain accession criteria. Interviews conducted in April and May 2016.
13. Interview with senior staff from the UNHCR, Belgrade. Interview conducted 28 February 2016.
14. Interview with minister for Serbian border police, Belgrade. Interview conducted 8 May 2016.
15. These violations included poor performance in the fight against corruption and pressure placed on judicial processes. Interview with former policy lead, DG NEAR, Brussels. Interview conducted 3 June 2016.

16. Interviewee A and Interviewee B, DG NEAR, Brussels. Interviews conducted 6 June 2016.
17. Interview with staff, Swiss Development Agency, Belgrade. Interview conducted April 2016.

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