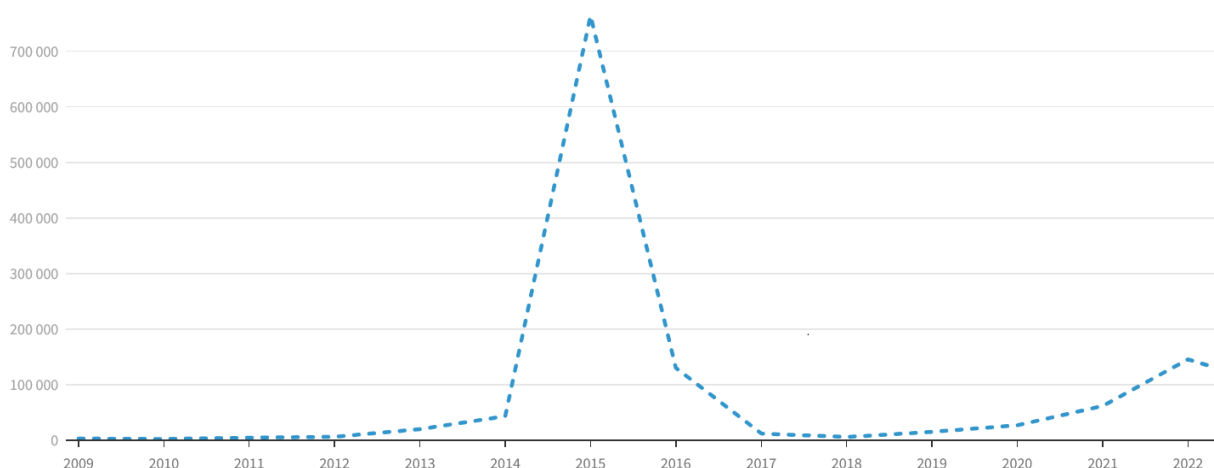


The Human Price of Fortress Europe in the Balkans

At the end of March 2026, a major migrant smuggling network was dismantled in the Balkans thanks to Operation “Ancora,” carried out in cooperation with various national police forces. This smuggling network is believed to have managed a flow of more than 100,000 people between 2023 and 2025, via Southeast Europe, specifically the Balkans.

This major dismantling has shed light on the current state of immigration to Europe: traffic on the Western Balkans route has been on the rise again for the past few years. **This migration route was one of the main ones used by migrants (mostly from Syria and Afghanistan) to reach the European Union in 2015–2016.**



Source: [Frontex](#)

[Illegal border crossings on the Western Balkans route \(credits : Frontex\)](#)

However, in this recently uncovered smuggling network, more than 1,000 vehicles used for human trafficking were identified, police said.

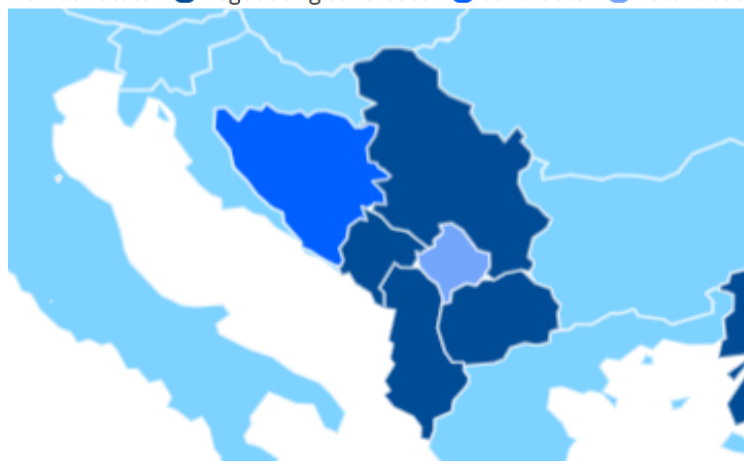
This highlights other controversial aspects of this migration route, a strategic crossroads in Europe. **The Western Balkans route reveals how EU migration governance increasingly relies on securitization and externalization, often at the expense of migrants' safety and dignity.**

While the countries of the Western Balkans seek to present a positive image to the EU, the lack of resources and adequate policies for managing migrants leads to the development of illegal networks, migrant smuggling, and even human trafficking. **This Balkan region, fractured and weakened by past wars and the ever-present nationalism is composed of states with radically different political trajectories. Among the countries of the former Yugoslavia, two have joined the European Union (Slovenia and Croatia), while to the east, Romania and Bulgaria also joined in 2007.**

The map of potential EU enlargement

Countries in the process of joining the European Union

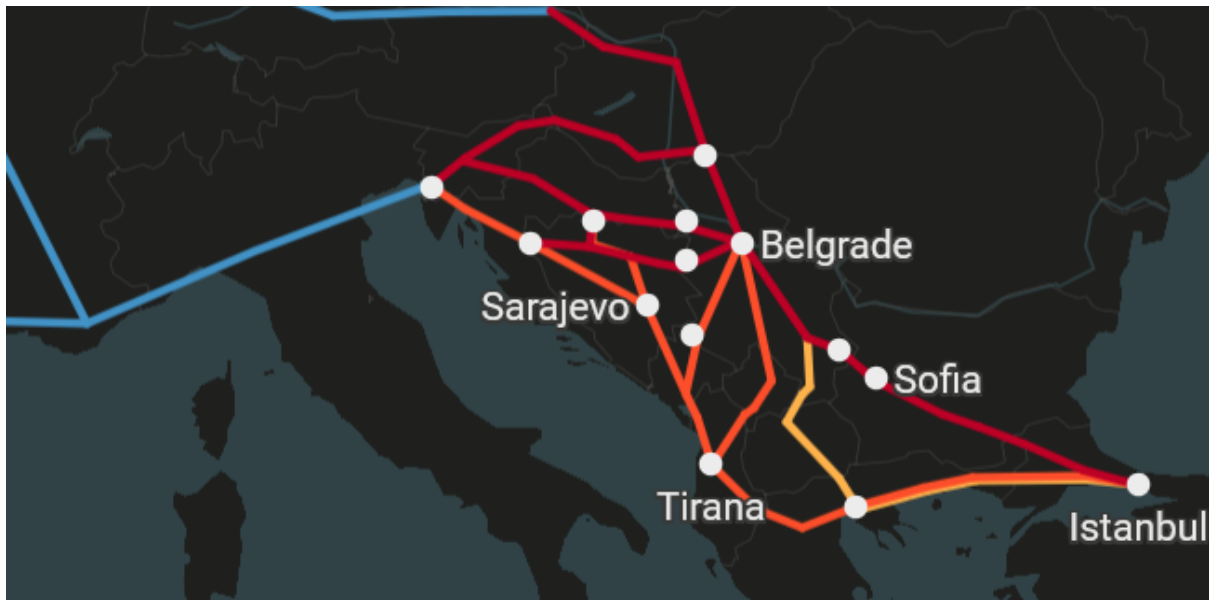
● Member State ● Negotiating candidate ● Candidate ● Potential candidate



Map from The New Union Post

However, regarding the migration issue, attention is focused on the so-called “Western Balkans route.”

The term “Western Balkans route” refers to irregular arrivals in the EU via the region comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Indeed, these countries, which have not joined the European Union, occupy a major strategic position at the gateway to “Fortress Europe.”



Main routes used by migrants in the Western Balkans (credits : Mediapart)

The countries in question, with the goal of joining the EU, are caught between a desire to set an example in migration management and a desire to take a firm stance, in the name of nationalism and, for some, an ideology of closing borders.

In December 2022, **the European Commission established an EU action plan for the Western Balkans.** This plan focuses on the migration issue but adopts a rather questionable hardline stance. **The main pillars concern strengthening border controls. Indeed, as a result of successive European enlargements, the Western Balkans now lie at the EU’s doorstep.** The EU is therefore compelled to cooperate more closely, particularly against smuggling networks in this region. **The Commission has launched an Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership.** It involves joint investigations, strengthened border management, and intelligence sharing to combat high migration pressures, supported by a €36 million EU-funded program. These initiatives against migrant smuggling are, of course, commendable,

but they were primarily created with the aim of reducing the number of migrants on this route and limiting the EU's intake, which is **ethically questionable**.

The same applies to the issue of guarantees provided by the EU to the countries of the Western Balkans. In this plan, the Commission promises to make progress on the visa issue. **The goal is for citizens of Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Serbia to be able to come to Europe without needing a visa.** However, this trade-off between visas and the outsourcing of migrant management is open to criticism, where the lives of these migrants are used as bargaining chips for entry into Europe.

Today, the EU's cooperation agreements go even further, as Frontex (an EU agency) is currently conducting operations in Balkan countries, notably in Serbia. Signed in 2024, this agreement is one of the most recent, following the one with Albania (2023).



Map from the European Council, 2024

Until now, Frontex has only had a small contingent in Serbia. **Staff levels are set to increase, and the number of permanent Frontex agents is expected to rise from 3,500 in 2023 to a total of 10,000 by 2027 in the country.** This raises questions given Frontex's track record in the Mediterranean and the Balkans. This deployment has significant political implications: the EU is further outsourcing the management of its borders, in partnership

with states that are not always close allies (notably Serbia, which has a relatively pro-Russian stance). Thus, in addition to turning the Balkan countries into a buffer zone in the name of a restrictive migration policy, the EU could partially undermine its own position through these partnerships; since Frontex is already facing criticism in Europe, this could spread to neighboring countries.



Article from Politis, September 2024 (Credits Photo : AFP)

This cooperation, focused on security concerns, also increases EU influence over domestic migration and visa policies in candidate countries such as Serbia. **For example, in 2023, Serbia suspended its visa waiver program with Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Cuba, Burundi, and India under pressure from the EU.** In migrant camps where Frontex is present, **local NGOs and authorities alike denounce disastrous living conditions.**

"The findings in the Consultative Forum's most recent report show how the conditions in which Frontex operates in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia are woefully inadequate and downright harmful to people on the move, especially unaccompanied children."

Anas Ambris, Communications Coordinator for the Border Violence Monitoring Network.

[Quote from an article in StateWatch, July 2025](#)



**Abandoned migrants's camp in Serbia, July 2025, StateWatch's article
(Credits Photo : Frontex)**

Faced with all these figures, these investments, and the technical language used by the EU in its migration policy, the most tragic thing is that we often forget those most directly affected: migrants and their daily reality along the Balkan route. **Most migrants crossing through the Balkans are housed in anonymous accommodations and transported from city to city by networks of smugglers in private vehicles.** The goal is to isolate them, placing them in situations of dependency, in order to exert greater control. Arriving alone, many lose their lives without any recognition.



Migrants' tombs without names (Credits Photo : Simon Rico, Mediapart)

According to local NGOs, the arrival of Frontex has not necessarily helped in managing the migration flow, but has instead led to a massive increase in the cost of passage (explained by increased border controls and investigations into irregular situations). Migrants are therefore in an even more precarious situation and must hide to avoid controls, often in dangerous places. **This is the case at the former train station in Kuzmin, a Serbian village near the Croatian border. There, a report shows us only the fleeting presence of migrants, their phone cards, and food scraps. There have been numerous accidents due to the nearby railroad tracks, resulting in several deaths among migrants, including that of a 6-year-old girl last year.**

“For years, everyone said that the Balkan route was a much safer route than the Mediterranean, despite the pushbacks and police violence. Paradoxically, the arrival of Frontex has made it more dangerous,”

insists Stevan Tatalović, a researcher and humanitarian activist.

[Quote from a Mediapart article, December 2025](#)

Faced with this grim reality, the authorities in the Balkan countries have few answers. Relying on their partnerships with the EU, they reassure their public by portraying the Balkans as a transit zone, where migrants are not meant to stay. **This partly serves their nationalist and xenophobic policies, particularly in Serbia, a country that has granted asylum to only 118 people since 2008.** Similarly, funding for humanitarian NGOs is dwindling in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Fieldwork is becoming increasingly precarious, and smugglers are able to quietly expand their migrant trafficking operations, rooted in an economy of fear.

Thus, the EU's track record in the Balkans is quite poor. While the EU touts its partnerships, the deployment of Frontex, and bilateral agreements, the number of people using the Western

Balkans route is on the rise again, yet there is a lack of reception facilities. The countries in the region, with EU support, are focusing entirely on security and anti-migrant rhetoric, making the journey to Europe increasingly difficult with each passing day.

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