



IMPACT OF THE 2015-2016 MIGRATION CRISIS ON BALKAN STATE RELATIONS REGARDING REGIONAL COOPERATION

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This article explores the impact of migration on interstate relations of source, transit, and target states by focusing on the Western Balkan migration route post-2015. The theoretic approach of the Copenhagen School is employed as it allows to interpret the securitising logic of discourse acts as well as the logic of regional security complexes. The article identifies the recurring themes of “unmanageable numbers” and “unmanageable integration” which were prevalent in the European discourse. Next, the article recounts a series of Europe wide unilateral border measures which were the result of individual governments attempting to limit the flow of migrants. Unilateral actions can result in flow blockage, diversion, or aggregation. The transnational nature of migration management is explored, as well as why states might act unilaterally or multilaterally and what negative or positive impacts could such actions have on other states involved.

The article concludes that the Balkan region’s EU and NATO aspirations played a key role in shaping its response to the crisis synergising with the regional EU’s security overlap. As far as Romania is concerned, it must continue to expand its migration management capacities in order to successfully do its part to mitigate its risk exposure and maximise its strategic diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis the issue of migration, especially in the eventuality of its inclusion into the Schengen area.

Keywords: migration management; Western route; Balkans; European Union; interstate relations;



INTRODUCTION

During 2015, a dramatic increase occurred in the number of irregular migrants on their way towards Central, Western, and Northern EU states. This became a socio-political issue with wide ranging implications. States and their citizens were bearing witness to a large flow of peoples from outside of Europe. Target or transit states found themselves strained to unprecedented levels, having their capacities surpassed. This article will examine the impact on the Balkan interstate relations and cooperation relying on the Copenhagen School of Security. Then, a timeline of the measures taken at the level of the European border will be detailed, measures taken in order to control the migration flow. The article will further exemplify the way how such measures divert the migration flows along alternative routes, and the last chapter will discuss how mismanagement of migration routes like these can lead to friction between neighbouring states, or between transit and target states. The concluding chapter will look at where these dynamics have brought the Balkan region and offer some suggestions for how the Romanian state might consider acting.

In general, the discourse of European reactions focused on two principal points:

1. *Unmanageable numbers*: the flux surpassed the managing capacity of individual states. The ability to manage such a flow requires a lot of institutional infrastructure for processing the migrants. This infrastructure was not large enough.
2. *Unmanageable integration*: the issue here is one of integration and what repercussions would occur on the host state, if it were to accept such large numbers of migrants.

It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate in detail the legitimacy of these two concerns. The author's view is that there was indeed a lack of processing capacity and a lack of political will to develop it (Edmonda, 2018, p. 198).

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The voices in favour of accepting migrants have pointed to how small the number migrants is in proportion to the population of the EU, however, the rise in Eurosceptic and populist movements in recent years made incumbent EU decision makers lean towards the closure of borders (Morvai, Djokovic, 2017, p. 277).

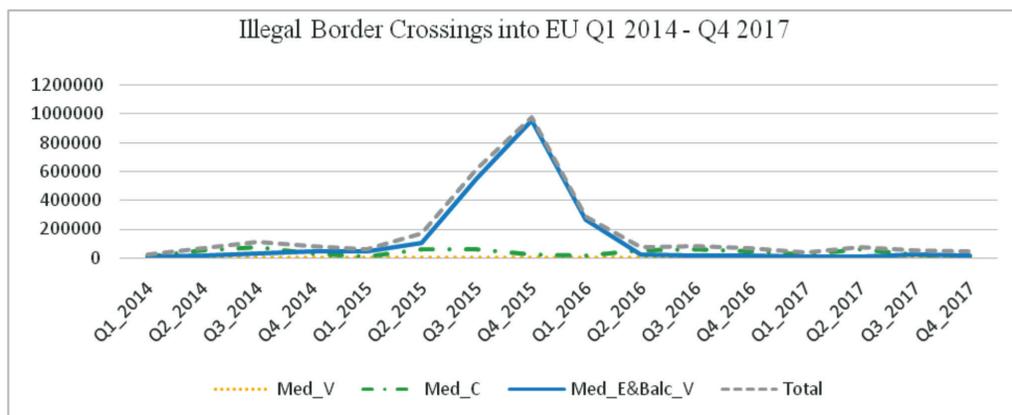


Diagram no. 1
(Frontex, Migratory Map, 2019)

The migration was initially split across the Mediterranean in a Western, Central and Eastern route. Events leading up to the migrant crisis, caused the western and central routes to fall out of use. This has resulted in a funnel effect of migration through the Eastern Route.

Thus, the people migrating from distant places like the sub-Saharan, horn of Africa, Middle East, Afghanistan and South-East Asia (Frontex Risk Analysis, 2015-2016) reached a Europe fairly divided on the issue of their arrival. The migration was initially split across the Mediterranean¹ in a Western, Central and Eastern route. Events leading up to the migrant crisis, caused the western and central routes to fall out of use. This has resulted in a funnel effect of migration through the Eastern Route. This disproportionate weight on the Eastern Mediterranean and West Balkan route is clearly visible in *diagram no. 1*².

The primary path of the route started from Turkey by land or sea into Greece then to North Macedonia, Serbia and into Hungary towards

¹ There is also an eastern land route through Ukraine, Belarus or Russia, which saw smaller use.

² The data presented refer to detections of illegal border-crossing rather than the number of persons, as the same person may cross the external border several times. However, there is currently no EU system in place capable of tracing each person's movements following an illegal border-crossing. Therefore, it is not possible to establish the precise number of persons who have illegally crossed the external border (according to Frontex, Migratory Map, 2019; FRAN&JORA, 2021, <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>).

central Europe (Frontex Western Balkan Route, 2017). Secondary flows passed through other Balkan states, like Bulgaria into North Macedonia or Serbia. However, Frontex reports based on recorded border crossing attempts show that migrants tend to follow the main path, until obligated to change course.



THE COPENHAGEN SCHOOL AND SECURITIZATION THROUGH DISCOURSE ACTS

The Copenhagen School of Security Studies was developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde and formally outlined first in their joint work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. The Copenhagen School looks at Security as a result of discourse acts performed by social agents, for example a Head of State. These acts of discourse can securitise a topic, for example declaring that state sovereignty or the fabric of society is threatened by unrestrained migration. Such a speech act turns the regulation of migration into a security problem which may permit extraordinary measures to be taken in the interest of security, for example constructing a border wall.

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The Copenhagen School of Security Studies has the following central features:

- Securitisation is resulted through successful *Speech Acts* which require a referent object, a securitising actor, functional actors and a legitimising audience.
- Security is divided into five interlinked and overlapping *Sectors* of activity: Societal, Political, Environmental, Military and Economic.
- *Security Complexes* are formed around an issue. Actors from sub-state to international levels can be a part of a single such complex.

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The Copenhagen School approach is useful for analysing the issue of securitisation of immigration because of its focus on discourse acts. Its breakdown of security into sectors is useful because immigration tends to be linked to the social sector primarily, as well as the political and economic sectors, perhaps even environmental. Furthermore, the theory's focus on discourse acts allows the consideration of a broad



typology of actors, from supra national organisations to influential non-governmental organisations. The Copenhagen School use of security complexes for analysing the interdependence of multiple unit actors of different types operating in different areas but all linked to the same issues.

When thinking about security sectors, the analyst must consider the following questions:

- *What the security agenda is within the sector?*
- *What types of actors are distinctive to the sector?*
- *What logic of threats and vulnerabilities operates within the sector?*
- *How the security dynamics within the sector divide among the local, regional, and global scales?* (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde, 1998, p. 19).

According to Buzan, Waever and de Wilde internal security complex dynamics can be placed on a spectrum consisting of: enmity (Iran, US, Russia, Israel); the middle (the Western Balkan states); amity (EU).

Sectors are useful in order to split a situation into more specific focus spaces. This is useful for analysis as it allows the thinker to limit the scope of observation by reducing the number of variables at play to a manageable degree.

According to Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (Ib., p. 12), internal security complex dynamics can be placed on a spectrum consisting of:

- *Enmity* – the complex member states act out of fear, rivalry and mutual perception of threat. States linked to the Syrian civil war can be placed in this category, Iran, US, Russia, Syria, Israel, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Gulf States.
- *The middle* – the complex is a security regime in which states still treat each other as potential threats but have made reassurance arrangements to reduce the security dilemma among them. The Western Balkan states can be placed here.
- *Amity* – the complex members interrelate as a pluralistic security community. An example of this is the EU (for the most part).

Beyond Amity, a region is so integrated that the security complex it formerly hosted becomes eliminated, “transforming it from an anarchic subsystem of states to a single, larger actor, within the system” (Ibid.).



There are two condition under which security complexes may not be present, according to Buzan, Waever and de Wilde:

❖ *Lack of capabilities* – in this case, there is no security complex formed because the states do not have the capacity to project their power externally. Such an arrangement is especially possible in isolated regions where major actors have agreed not to get involved.

❖ *Overlay* – in this case, the security complex is not formed because a strong external actor has managed to suppress it. This usually “involves extensive stationing of armed forces in the areas overlaying by the intervening great power(s). Intervention usually reinforces the local security dynamics; overlay subordinates them to the larger pattern of major power rivalries and may even obliterate them” (Ibid. pp. 12-13).

When changes to a Security Complex are triggered, the structural options are:

- *Maintenance of the status quo* – when the changes have supported or have not seriously undermined the structure.
- *Internal transformation* – when the changes within the complex’s outer boundary are caused by regional political integration, decisive shifts in balance of power, or major alternations in the pattern of amity and enmity.
- *External transformation* – occurs when the outer boundary is redrawn to allow addition or deletion of major states from the complex.
- *Overlay* – occurs when external powers suppress indigenous security dynamic.

That being said, Buzan, Waever and de Wilde claim security complexes’ regionalizing logic may be weak in the case of units not being fixed or threats not being conditioned by distance (Ibid. p. 16). This observation is important for the topic of this thesis, as the issue of migration is one that can be difficult to define concretely in space and time. Thus, it is possible for a security complex to develop a weak regionalising security logic. This may offer another explanation to why the issues of migration are so close to other more concretely definable ideas such as borders and sovereignty, history and nation.

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Perhaps these more fixed concepts allow for the strengthening of security logic on the topic of migration.

A TIMELINE OF EUROPEAN BORDER MEASURES DURING THE HEIGHT OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

This chapter collects a timeline of telling events regarding unilateral border control measures all throughout 2015 and early 2016. This timeline depicts the cascading nature of such actions on a European level.

4 August 2015 – Bulgaria completes a 4.5m high razor wire fence on its border with Turkey in an attempt to dissuade refugees and irregular migrants. The construction of the fence had been ongoing since 2013.

14 September 2015 – Austria starts to make border checks on its Slovenian and Hungarian frontier. A barbed wire fence that was already in construction to counter illegal crossings from Slovenia sparks protests by Austrian winemakers who want its construction to be ceased.

- *Early 2015* – Greece turns into the key entry point towards Europe for refugees and irregular migrants. Authorities declare themselves overwhelmed by the large number of asylum seekers. The Greco-Turkish land border had been already reinforced in 2012 with a 12.5 km fence. In the wake of the migrant flux of 2015, European Union authorities request of Greece to register, identify, and collect fingerprints from individuals (Coelho, Kjuka, Musanipova).
- *4 August 2015* – Bulgaria completes a 4.5m high razor wire fence on its border with Turkey in an attempt to dissuade refugees and irregular migrants. The construction of the fence had been ongoing since 2013 (Mortimer, 2015).
- *13 September 2015* – Germany puts in action border controls on Southern border with Austrian (BBC, *Migrant crisis*, 2015).
- *14 September 2015* – Austria starts to make border checks on its Slovenian and Hungarian frontier. A barbed wire fence that was already in construction to counter illegal crossings from Slovenia sparks protests by Austrian winemakers who want its construction to be ceased (Murphy, 2015).
- *Second event on 14 September 2015* – Hungary finishes a border fence along its southern frontier with Serbia to oppose the flux of irregular migrants and refugees, most of which are reported to be heading for states in western Europe (BBC, *Refugees “exhausted” after Serbia-Hungary border closes*, 2015).
- *Third event on 14 September 2015* – Slovakia begins enforcing border checks (Reuters, *Slovakia putting temporary border controls in place*, 2015).

- 15 October 2015 – Hungary completes the construction for a fence on its frontier with Croatia (Feher, 2015).
- 10 November 2015 – France indefinitely enforces border checks in the wake of terrorist strikes in Paris that were unleashed by Islamist militants. In Calais, the governments of the United Kingdom and France intend to construct a protective enclosure to counter migrants from reaching the Channel Tunnel. Approximately 2,500 persons reside in camps referred to as “the Jungle,” on the outskirts of Calais (Coelho, Kjuka, Musanipova, Ib.).
- 11 November 2015 – Slovenia starts the construction of a frontier razor-wire fence on its Croatian border. Ljubljana warns it is considering enforcing stricter border checks if Germany and Austria do the same (Milekic, 2015)
- Second event on 11 November 2015 – Sweden introduced border checks on its bridge link with Denmark and on its ferry ports which link it with Denmark and Germany (Maurice, 2015).
- 27 November 2015 – Norway begins enforcing border checks in order to stop refugees from coming over the Swedish border (Coelho, Kjuka, Musanipova, Ib.).
- 28 November 2015 – Former Republic of Macedonia deploys soldiers to begin construction of a 3m high razor-wire fence on southern frontier with Greece (The Guardian, *Migrants attack Macedonian police*, 2015).
- 4 January 2016 – Sweden begins enforcing ID checks for people coming via rail from Denmark (BBC, *Migrants Crisis: Sweden Border Checks Come into Force*, 2016).
- Second event on 4 January 2016 – Denmark increases border checks on its border with Germany (Tange, Dickson, 2015).
- 14 January 2016 – Norway calls for refugees to go back to Russia (Luhn, 2016). In reply, Russia shuts its borders due to “security reasons” (Deutsche Welle, 2016).
- 28 February 2016 – Hungary declares its intentions to construct a fence on its frontier with Romania in the event that migrants begin using that path instead of passing through Croatia. (Chiriac, 2016).



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The resulting image is the result of a domino of unilateral actions to regulate border crossings and deny access to illegal migrants. In *figure no. 1*, in red highlight, the border restrictions listed in this chapter can be noticed.



Figure no. 1: Fencing Off Europe
(Coelho, Kjuka, Musanipova)

MIGRATION PUSHBACK, PUSHFORWARD, SPILLOVER AND BLOCKAGE

Unilateral border closures such as the ones listed in the previous chapter are labelled as pushback measures and can have a spillover effect. *“What these fences often do is simply divert migrants from one border to another”* (Collins, Mohdin, 2016). See below the example taken from the West Balkan route.

Impact of the 2015-2016 Migration Crisis on Balkan State Relations regarding Regional Cooperation



Figure no. 2: Greece built a wall along its border with Turkey at the end of 2012; so did Bulgaria, in the middle of 2014 (Collins, Mohdin, 2016)



Figure no. 3: Hungary spent over 100 million dollars to build a fence along its border with Serbia, in September 2015 (lb.)



Figure no. 4: Hungary built a wall along its border with Croatia, thus cutting a vital route towards Western Europe. (lb.)



Figure no. 5: The immigrants who were crossing Croatia were stopped, again, after Slovenia completed the construction of its wall. (lb.)

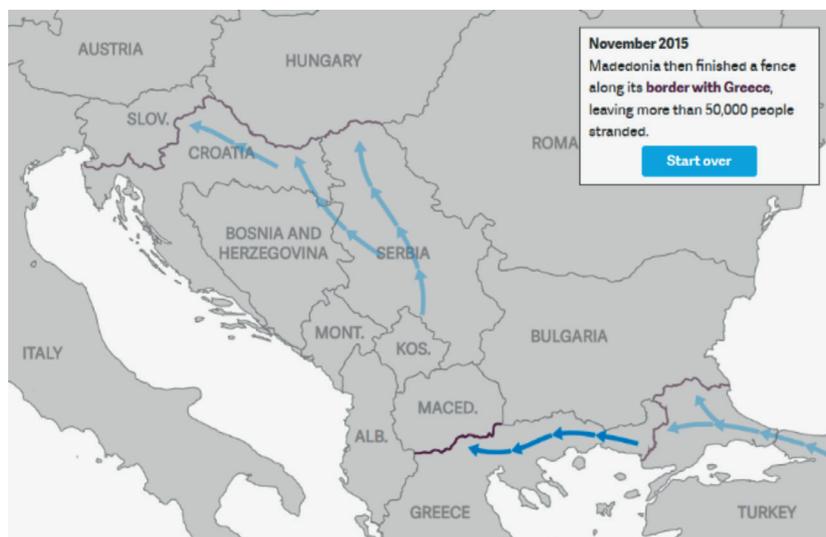


Figure no. 6: North Macedonia built a wall along its border with Greece, thus leaving more than 50.000 people stuck (lb.)

After the construction of the land fence along the Turkish border, the flow diverted (*spillover*) through the Aegean. In the event that the migration flow cannot be diverted or cannot overflow elsewhere, a damn-like (*blockage*) effect can occur, whereby irregular migrants begin to aggregate in the last state they had arrived in, before encountering the unpassable border. This happens as migrants still on the way may have limited access to accurate information and even if they do, they may have limited ability to change route until they reach a blockage. Such a situation leads to ad hoc camps appearing near the closed border or for the “*aggregating*” state to spend resources so as to care for the stranded migrants. Such state efforts can take the form of improvised housing camps (der Brelie, Salfiti, 2018). This was the case with the closure of the Greek-Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia border, which left 50,000 people stranded in Greece (Collins, Mohdin, lb.). States like Serbia and North Macedonia adopted a *push-forward* strategy, whereby they would facilitate the migrant’s transit across their territory, in an effort to limit the amount of internal disruption (Edmonda, lb.).

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ANALYSING HOW THE WESTERN BALKAN ILLEGAL MIGRANT ROUTE CAN IMPACT STATE RELATIONS

The very transnational nature of migration makes it a multi-state issue. The multilateral management of migration flows in some ways are like multilateral river management. Migration source, transit and target states all have a stake in the issue. Furthermore, states that neighbour the transit states also have an interest in the good management of such phenomena, as they can become transit states if the flow is diverted accordingly.

States have a responsibility to respond to migration flows and their governments are expected to act in the interest of the state, their citizens and to some extent their strategic partners. However, the internal and external factors pressuring the state to act might not be aligned. Details matter on a case by case basis. A transnational issue can presumably be addressed through multiple unilateral actions. It can be argued that a multilateral coordinated action would be more likely to yield a positive outcome. Such multilateral action could involve all parties with an interest in the management of the migration flow. These parties are now partners in a collective effort to solve a problem they all share. By sharing this responsibility and the actual effort of managing the challenge, the outcome may come more surely and more fully. That being said, the timeline might illustrate how unilateral actions were required because of the slow collective reaction. Coordinate action takes time and effort to coordinate and enact.

The Balkan states have a complex internal dynamic with historic alliances and rivalries, ongoing disputes as well as common aspirations – not to mention the influences from local powers such as Turkey or greater powers such as Russia, the US and EU. However, in the interest of brevity regarding the case of the Balkan states this article will risk reducing this complexity by looking on those things that might be most relevant to the management of migration.

Before looking at how migration figures into the interests of Balkan states, it is worth noting one predominant regional interest: The Balkan states desire to participate in supra-regional partnerships for their benefit. The two biggest such institutions are those

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of the EU and NATO. Membership into either of these institutions brings significant advantages to security, stability and prospects of development. Momentarily all Balkan states are either members of the EU or in aspiring to negotiate their way in. Likewise, aside from Serbia, all are either already NATO members or also aspiring to join the collective security alliance. The fact that most states desire to belong to some form of multilateral socio-economic and political collective like the EU or military alliance like NATO is already an incentive for the states to find ways to work together and maintain good relations. Such shared interests (as well as the interests of the EU and NATO) arguably temper the intensity of local disputes around topics like the case of Kosovo. In fact, recent breakthroughs such as Greece's settlement of disputes with North Macedonia is a sign that given enough effort, tenacity and political will, compromises can be made and the path for accession opened for the respective candidates.

Thus, the good management of migration from the Balkan states is not only something that they must come to terms in the interest of their own state resources, but also as part of their bids for EU (and perhaps to a lesser extent NATO) accession. This EU aspiration has two aspects to consider:

- *The standard of conduct aspect:* EU membership prerequisites demand states adhere to certain standards of conduct with regard to human rights (Salamon, 2016, vol. 54, pp. 151-163). This means if the states want to be favourably reviewed for membership, they must conduct themselves accordingly vis-à-vis the migrants.
- *The negotiative token aspect:* from a realpolitik point of view, transit states hold leverage over both downstream and upstream states. This leverage can be used as a token in the negotiations for the EU membership status³.

The ideal strategy for a state would be to contribute to the migration control while upholding standards of conduct. This ideal execution requires the most planning and coordination, subsequently



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³ Turkey is a prime example of how a transit state can use its control over themigration flow as a negotiation token. Using this token, Turkey pressured the EU to give it foreign aid and to return to the discussion table regarding EU accession (Ibid.)



considerable resources – especially given the scale of the migration through the Balkan route. When state capabilities are limited these two aspects can come into contradiction. Reducing migration flow into the EU heartland, might require methods which are in breach of the EU standards.

What occurred during the height of the flux across the Balkan route was a disjointed series of actions which seemed governed by an attempt to keep migrants out of every state's territory by either closing the borders to deny entry or speeding their transit out of the current country and into the next. These sort of disjointed actions which are not backed by coordinate shared responsibility opens the space for finger pointing and passing the blame from one state to another. Even after the supposed closure of the Balkan route in the wake of the EU-Turkey accord⁴ migrants continue to be a source of dispute between EU and Balkan states as to how to distribute responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ROMANIA

The framework for an asylum system and capacities for migration management of the EU aspiring Balkan states were set up as part of accession negotiations. However, under the extreme stress of the 2015 migration surge, the system showed itself inadequate to meet the challenges. The states were *“neither willing nor able to process the quantity of asylum applications that could potentially be lodged by all the persons transiting”* (Salamon, Ib.). The situation was made worse by failures to uphold commitments from the EU (Deutsche Welle, *Germany Limits Refugee Family*, 2017) and even media reports (Deutsche Welle, *Germany limits refugee family*, 2017), claiming that there are agreements between states to intentionally slow down processing of requests such as family reunification. Transit states find themselves becoming encumbered with ‘trapped’ migrants who can neither be sent back, nor forward, nor truly settled (UNHCR, 2017).

⁴ Patrick Kingsley, *Tens of thousands migrate through Balkans since route declared shut*, The Guardian, 30.08.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/30/tens-of-thousandsmigrate-through-balkans-since-route-declared-shut> (accessed: 13.06.2021).

Management of migration requires a state infrastructure in place that can receive, process, and integrate or effectively refuse incoming migrant numbers. As such, migration flow management can be a considerable drain on state resources⁵. The Balkan states are relatively small by comparison to the core EU states. This indicates that their individual ability to handle a migration flux increase is limited. Thus, migration can become a source of conflict as it can cost states resources to handle. Unilateral border closures or transit facilitation merely externalise the resource drain and responsibility to another (usually adjacent) state. This pattern of action risks to sour relations, which is something generally undesirable, particularly between Balkan states some of which have historically antagonistic relations with neighbours to begin with. When dealing with an issue that is as geographically fluid as irregular migration, actions in the short-term self-interest of a state can have consequences in the long-term on other states in the region. The border closures may obstruct migration, but it creates conditions for human smuggling networks to appear (der Brelie, Salfiti, 2018). Amongst the perceived chaos and combative rhetoric, irregular “migrant hunter” paramilitary units have appeared along the Balkan route (Than, 2017). This is a dangerous development as it erodes the state’s monopoly on the use of legitimate violence. Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic warned that the Balkan route can destabilise the entire south-eastern region of Europe through its criminal repercussions (Agenzia Nova, 2016). States with an interest in the migration issue together with the European Commission declared that a multilateral collective effort would bring about a successful solution (European Commission, 2015).

The supra-national aspirations of the Balkan states to join structures such as the EU and NATO, as well as the influence of these institutions has likely had a beneficial tempering effect on the region. However, should these tempering influences dwindle, and should the flow of migration increase again, it would be likely that the regional stability would decrease.



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⁵ It can also be a source of benefits, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this article.



The Copenhagen Approach would argue that the many extra-ordinary actions were enabled through the successful securitization of the immigration issue. Applying the concept of security complex analysis on the Balkans, the interpretation would be that there is a strong degree of security overlap from the EU (and to some extent NATO) unto the region. This overlap synergises with the region's EU aspirations, which has a catalytic effect on regional cooperation and integration. However, the region's historic tensions and contemporary disputes are a source for conflict at worst, frozen relations at best.

In this context, Romania ought to continue to consider itself a EU and NATO member, to embrace these roles and to act accordingly. Adopting a role of support towards the transit countries' efforts to manage the migration flow, which can be in the form of aid materials and funding to help develop migrant processing and improve migrant housing. Romania could also consider developing a rapid response team of experts, specialist soldiers. Such a unit could be small and nimble, capable of rapidly integrating into an ongoing operation at a processing centre or a camp to help in the event of a capacities' shortage.

Romania has a responsibility to itself to develop adequate strategic capacities to be a proactive participant of migration management, especially in the eventuality of its inclusion into the Schengen area.

Romania can also be of help by expanding its own capacity for migrant housing and processing. The ability to share the burden of this EU wide challenge can be a source of prestige and even diplomatic leverage if correctly treated as a strategic advantage. Although internal political competition might make it difficult to form a wide enough consensus in order to implement such policies, without political adversaries engaging in anti-immigrant fear mongering for political gains.

So far, the Romanian state has been mostly avoided by the major migration transit routes, but as this article has shown, things can change and escalate in a short time span. Dormant routes can re-activate, they can shift, or new routes can appear. Migration flows can surge, and neighbouring states might decide to push migrants forward disregarding the negative effects of such unilateral decisions. In this case, Romania has a responsibility to itself to develop adequate strategic capacities to be a proactive participant of migration management, especially in the eventuality of its inclusion into the Schengen area.

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