

Border and Bordering Practices in an EU “Buffer Zone”: The Case of Serbia

Marija Pavicevic

Abstract: *The geographical expansion of the EU migration policies toward candidate countries in the Western Balkans is reshaping perceptions of borders—both as physical realities and socio-political constructs. Drawing on insights from the Critical Border Studies (CBS) framework, this article explores the externalization of migration and border management in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on Serbia's central position along the Balkan route. It examines Serbia's role in border and migration governance beyond the asymmetrical dynamics of the EU accession process, considering the political and economic advantages of its 'buffer zone' status—where it safeguards the EU's external borders while leveraging this position as a tool of migration diplomacy.*

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the role of Serbia's borders within the broader architecture of the European Union migration management, with a particular focus on Serbia's positioning as a 'buffer zone', informed by the theoretical lens of Critical Border Studies (CBS).¹ The theoretical framework of CBS is an interdisciplinary approach that examines borders not only as static geographical lines but as dynamic processes and practices. It challenges traditional notions of borders and emphasizes their fluid, multidimensional nature. I draw on the concept of 'bordering practices' which refers to any kind of activity that effectively constitutes a (national) border or that modifies the territorial borders in any kind of way. Borders are, thus, not merely seen as physical markers, but they are seen to be enacted through policies, social interactions, and symbolic acts. As such, individuals and institutions play an active role in shaping borders, for example, through creating and shaping discourses or performing actions. This implies that borders are not only perceived as territorial lines on a map, but that borders are also performed through rituals, such as when citizens show their passports during internal controls in a country or when refugees apply for international protection. In this

way, the bordering practices have a performative value on socio-economic policies and realities.

Studying the period between 2015 and 2024, the material informing this study consists of empirical fieldwork in Serbia, including more than 60 interviews with the EU officials, Serbian ministries, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Furthermore, I have also analyzed the official documents provided by the UNHCR, Frontex, Europol, and the European Commission, as well as the Serbian legislation and national strategies on migration, borders, and asylum.

EXTERNALIZATION OF BORDERS AND BORDERING PRACTICES

In modern society, the state demonstrates the omnipresence of borders and intrudes extensively into people's lives and bodies through biometric technologies.² Nevertheless, this presence of bordering practices does not imply that borders are everywhere, but rather that for some people, i.e., those who are liable to border control, borders are everywhere, while for others, i.e., those who are not targeted by border control, borders are not everywhere.³ From this perspective, borders therefore are not fixed, but follow the movements of people liable to control.

The Critical Border Studies theoretical framework argues that in relation to borders the notions of time and space are blurred.⁴ In fact, the location of the border is seen as a form of continuous stretching both within a state and outside of the limits of its sovereignty through border control

technologies and practices of externalization or outsourcing of border and migration control to countries outside the EU.

The EU's migration policies have 'gradually transformed into outsourcing of borders at a distance, with border guards and buffer zones'.⁵ Therefore, the constitution of buffer zones, through the externalization and securitization of borders,⁶ offers an opportunity to analyze the bordering practices in Serbia during and after the 2015 'migration crisis', demonstrating the characteristics of the EU and Serbian migration policies.

While the location of the border, *stricto sensu*, is complex to define, the use of modern technologies leads to both the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the border.⁷ This happens both within and outside the Schengen area, transforming the location of border control. It also transforms the nature of border control as physical barriers, boundaries, or the shape of a state no longer constitute the border. Instead, the border, and along with it border control, are activated by individuals on the move. Since the border control technologies are increasingly remote from the EU borders and can be defined as 'remote control tools',⁸ they encounter the border in its virtual form long before they have crossed (or attempted to cross) the physical border.

The EU's biometric digitalization in the Western Balkan countries expands the concept of border control by means of data exchange on migrants and refugees via cooperation with Frontex⁹ and Europol.¹⁰ In order to facilitate the exchange of data, the harmonization of technologies is enacted through the development strategy of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior¹¹ as a way to modernize the Ministry's information system, "considering in particular the need to establish exchange with large-scale information systems which are used in the EU such as the Dublin and Eurodac databases but also SIS II, VIS12 and Europol".¹³

Therefore, these bordering practices blur the distinction between inside and outside and move

focus away from the border as a physical line to the individual on the move and his or her legal status. As a result, border control is becoming less and less material, enabling it to be outsourced long before a Schengen border is crossed. Borders become virtual networks for exchanging data on migrants or refugees, no longer limited to territories but to the ideas and practices of the EU migration policy.

THE OUTSOURCING OF THE EU BORDERS IN SERBIA: ANALYSIS OF THE BUFFER ZONE BORDERS

Through the EU accession process, the EU imposes a border control regime to Serbia,¹⁴ consolidating the country's status as a border guard of the EU's external borders. To define the contours of Serbian migration policy, it is necessary to analyze and qualify these terms in the context of the 2015 'migration crisis'.

The term 'buffer zone' refers to a geopolitical space that is protecting 'by non-military means, a group of powerful and essentially stable states from a perceived non-military security threat deriving from a proximate region of economic and political instability'.¹⁵ As has been argued before, Serbia effectively functions as a buffer zone for the EU as much as it absorbs 'shocks' or mitigates potentially 'difficult' migration situations for the EU member states. The securitization of the EU's external borders was reinforced in the wake of the 2015 'migration crisis', confirming the Western Balkan countries' status as the shock absorbers protecting the EU member countries from 'unwanted' migrants. In the following, I offer a historical and political genealogy of how Serbia has become a buffer zone country.

The countries on the Balkan migration route are the countries of the Western Balkans region. At the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the Western Balkans were designated as a distinct geopolitical area comprising Albania and all the countries of former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo),¹⁶ except for Slovenia. This regional designation is coupled to the prospect of EU

membership, a process that is financially supported by the EU. Part of this accession process is that the states integrate the EU migration control policies, cooperate with the EU migration management institutions, and access European funds dedicated to these matters. One of the first objectives following the Thessaloniki summit has been to introduce visa liberalization for citizens of the Western Balkans region. A prerequisite for this was the Western Balkan states' adoption of the EU migration policies. This includes the EU strategy of externalization of migration, asylum and borders through instruments such as readmission agreements, cross-border cooperation, and the exchange of data on migrants and refugees. In other words, controlling borders and the migration of third-country nationals that transit or immigrate from the Western Balkans to the EU member states was a precondition for the visa liberalizations for Western Balkan countries.

The 2015 'migration crisis' has consolidated Serbia's geopolitical position at the heart of the buffer zone of the Western Balkans, through intensified cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). The priority of this cooperation with Serbia as part of the 'first line of defense' was underlined by Frontex Executive Director Fabrice Leggeri in 2017.¹⁷ The status agreement between Serbia and Frontex was signed in 2019. Similar agreements were signed with Albania in 2018, with North Macedonia in 2022, and with Montenegro in 2019.¹⁸

Since the adoption of a new regulation in 2019, Frontex is allowed to practice executive powers in a third country, such as border checks and registration of persons.¹⁹ Since 2022, Frontex has signed border management cooperation agreements with Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Followed by the implementation of data exchanges with the EU, the cooperation with Frontex, and the establishment of a network of Frontex liaison officers spread across the region, is supporting the emergence of a deterritorialized

security area, enabling the externalization of EU borders throughout the Western Balkans.

CIRCULAR MOVEMENTS ON THE BALKAN ROUTE

Up until 2015, the migration routes ran from North Macedonia and Bulgaria meeting up in Serbia's capital Belgrade and continuing towards Hungary, Austria, and Germany (see map 1 below).

Map 1: Migration routes before 15 Sept 2015²⁰



As soon as the Hungarian border closed on September 15, 2015, the migrants' route shifted westwards, towards Croatia (see map 2 below).²¹

After the EU-Turkey Statement in early 2016, the countries on the Balkan route declared the 'closure' of the route. In effect, this meant the intensification of repressive and violent border control practices in North Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Croatia, reported increase in chain pushbacks,²³ as well as consolidation of restrictive migration and asylum policies.

Because of Hungary's increasingly restrictive migration policies, particularly the July 2016 amendments to the Asylum Act and the State Border Act, which authorized Hungarian police to summarily return migrants apprehended within 8

kilometres of the border, numerous migrants were left stranded at the Serbian-Hungarian border.²⁴

Map 2: Migration routes between 2015-2016²²

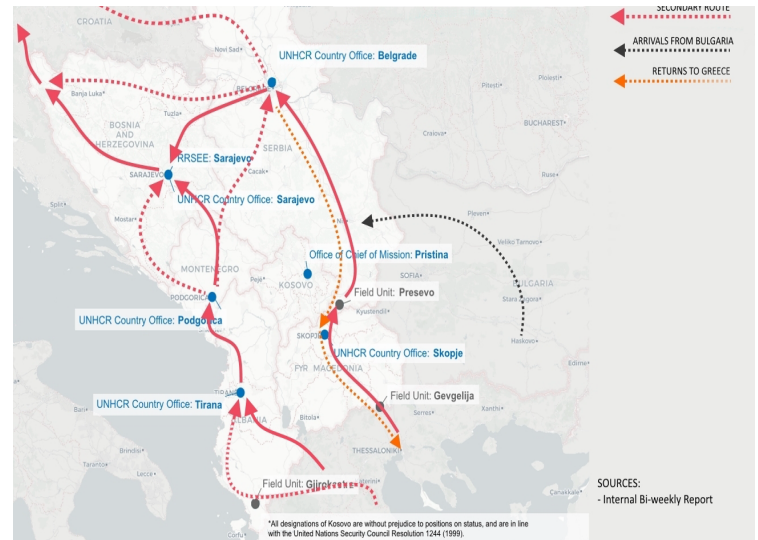


These restrictive policies have caused a humanitarian crisis on Serbian-Hungarian border and provoked strong reactions of civil society organizations, including the Hungarian Helsinki Committee,²⁵ pointing out the violation of international refugee law and EU law, which guarantees asylum seekers the right to remain on the territory of the EU Member State until a decision on their asylum application is made.

However, while some migrants were stranded, these repressive practices have also amplified circular movements within the Western Balkans region. Following the restrictions on migrant mobility, the directions of migratory movements have changed: the transit route now goes through Albania, Montenegro or Kosovo,²⁶ North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in an attempt to cross the border into Croatia.²⁷ If their attempt proves unsuccessful, migrants return to Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia, with the intention of making subsequent attempts to cross the border, thereby creating a circular movement within the region.²⁸

While between 2015 and 2017, the majority of migrants passed through Serbia to access the territories of Hungary or Croatia, during the second half of 2017, the UNHCR noted an increase in the number of migrants arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina from Serbia or Montenegro (see map 3).²⁹

Map 3: Circular movements since 2017³⁰



Since 2017³¹ up until today,³² the circular mobility within the region is a result of pushbacks from the EU member states, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as a chain pushback from Serbia to North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as well as from Kosovo to Albania, Montenegro or to Serbia in a circular manner.³³ Even though the migratory movements have been changing within the region, creating a relatively closed circle, the presence of migrants in Serbia is still remarkable, as noted by the UNHCR report from January 2025.³⁴ I therefore observe the circular movements within the region as a reaction to the restrictive migration policies of the European border regime and ultimately, as an expression of migrant's agency.³⁵

BORDERS AS TOOLS OF MIGRATION DIPLOMACY

Since the 2015 'migration crisis' Serbia uses the geopolitical position of its borders as a tool of migration diplomacy.³⁶ As a direct consequence of

restrictive migration and border policies and the externalization of migration and border control to Serbia, many migrants remain stranded in Serbia. The EU is, thus, depending on Serbia's 'protection' of its external borders from unwanted migration, and is encouraging the Serbian authorities to keep migrants stranded on their territory, as a deterrence measure. Serbia, in turn, desires to gain political leverage vis-à-vis the EU by acting as a 'reliable partner'.³⁷

The Serbian government uses its position on the Balkan route, bordering the EU member states, and its capacity to manage the transit and reception of migrants, to negotiate the amount of EU funding. Without such funding, Serbia would not be able to maintain 'the human quality of the humanitarian system of migration management',³⁸ as a state official declared in 2016. As an otherwise 'weak' actor in international relations,³⁹ Serbia practices migration diplomacy. This means that Serbia makes use of the EU's interest in controlling migration to its territory to obtain political and economic benefits, including funding through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance- IPA I, II, and III⁴⁰ and the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis -MADAD 1 and 2.⁴¹ Serbia's buffer zone status thus paradoxically strengthens institutional, political, and economic relations between the EU and Serbia⁴² and the multilateral and bilateral relations⁴³ between Serbia and the EU and its member states have indeed intensified since the 2015 'migration crisis'. Since 2015, Serbia has signed bilateral agreements with Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, allowing the deployment of the border guards on the borders between Serbia, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia within the framework of the EU-funded project -Special Measures II.⁴⁴

Relations between the EU and Serbia reveal a convergence of interests regarding the reception of migrants and asylum seekers and their confinement in camps, which are run by the Serbian state and financed by the EU. Serbia's government considers the migrants to be in transit, 'not willing to stay',⁴⁵ as

Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić declared. In combination with a malfunctioning reception system, migrants and asylum seekers end up socially isolated and often in a legal limbo. In a situation in which migration control is effectively transferred to an EU accession country that despite receiving substantial funding, refrains from making significant commitments to offering dignified living conditions to migrants, this treatment of migrants and asylum seekers has become a characteristic result of EU migration policy.

CONCLUSION

This article focuses on the role of Serbia in protecting the EU's external borders. This is done through two interrelated and simultaneous processes, namely the Europeanisation of Serbian migration and asylum policy, initiated through the EU accession process, and through the EU's strategic externalization of migration, asylum and border practices, which together form what I have termed a 'buffer zone'. From a perspective on borders and bordering practices, the institutionalization of cooperation between Serbia and the EU (mainly through Frontex and Europol), which also facilitated the exchange of immigration data, produces borders that are no longer linked to territorial boundaries of the state but to bordering practices. The article also demonstrates that Serbia leverages its buffer zone status and uses its borders as a tool of its migration diplomacy.

REFERENCES

- [1] Parker, N. & Adler-Nissen, R. 2012. Picking and Choosing the 'Sovereign' Border: A Theory of Changing State Bordering Practices. *Geopolitics*, 17; Vaughan-Williams, N. 2009. *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power*. Edinburgh University Press.
- [2] Parker, N., & Vaughan-Williams, N. 2012; Parker, N. & Adler-Nissen, R. 2012; Newman, D. 2006. Borders and Bordering: Towards an Interdisciplinary Dialogue. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9(2), 171-186.
- [3] Salter, M. B. 2008. When the Exception Becomes the Rule: Borders, Sovereignty, and Citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 12(4), 365-380.
- [4] Parker, N., & Vaughan-Williams, N. 2012; Parker, N. & Adler-Nissen, R. 2012
- [5] Wihtol de Wenden, C. 2017. *The Migration Question In the 21st Century: Migrants, Refugees and International Relations*. Presses de Sciences Po, pp.230; Wihtol de Wenden, C. 2018. Borders, Nationalism and Political Identity. *Pouvoirs*, 165(2), 39-49.
- [6] Bigo, D. 2014. The (in)securitization Practices of the Three Universes of EU Border Control: Military/Naval – Border guards/police – Database Analysts. *Security Dialogue*, 45(3), 209-225.
- [7] Groenendijk, C., Guild, E. & Minderhoud, P. E. 2003. *In Search of Europe's Borders*. Springer Publishing.
- [8] Bigo, D. & Guild, E. Eds. 2005. Controlling Frontiers. Free Movement into and within Europe. Ashgate.
- [9] Serbia have signed the Working arrangement with Frontex in 2009 and Status agreement in 2019; Available at: https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/Working_Arrangements/WA_with_Serbia.pdf; <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-serbia-sign-agreement-on-european-border-and-coast-guard-cooperation>
- [10] Cooperation between Serbian and Europol since 2019; Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/europol-19-2021/fr>
- [11] The Development strategy of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior - 2018-2023- Available at: http://mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/71fdf00f-7eb3-455f-9421-02ee6a190e17/PDF_Strategija+razvoja+MUP-a+2018-2023.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=nufR2ez
- [12] European data protection system; Available at: https://edps.europa.eu/data-protection/european-it-systems/schengen-information-system_fr
- [13] The Development strategy of the Serbian Ministry of the Interior - 2018-2023. Available at: http://mup.gov.rs/wps/wcm/connect/71fdf00f-7eb3-455f-9421-02ee6a190e17/PDF_Strategija+razvoja+MUP-a+2018-2023.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=nufR2ez
- [14] Euskirchen, M., Lebuhn, H. & Ray, G. 2007. From Borderline to Borderland: The Changing European Border Regime. *Monthly Review*, 59(6), 41.
- [15] Collinson, S. 1996. Visa Requirements, Carrier Sanctions, 'Safe Third Countries' and 'Readmission': The Development of an Asylum 'Buffer Zone' in Europe. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 21 (1), 79.
- [16] Since Croatia became an EU member state in 2013, it is no longer part of the Western Balkans club.
- [17] Interview with Fabrice Leggeri; Available at: <https://europa.rs/leggeri-frontex-liaison-officer-coming-to-serbia-will-be-responsible-for-entire-western-balkans/?lang=en>
- [18] The status agreement was signed on October 5, 2018 by Albania, followed by Montenegro on October 7, 2019, then Serbia on November 19, 2019, and North Macedonia in October 2022, while Bosnia-Herzegovina has still not signed. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:4464642>
- [19] EU Deploying armed Frontex teams on the 'Balkan Route': agreements with Serbia and Macedonia on the way, May 2017; Available at: <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2017/may/eu-deploying-armed-frontex-teams-on-the-balkan-route-agreements-with-serbia-and-macedonia-on-the-way/>, accessed March 23, 2023
- [20] UNHCR report on Desperate Journeys Septembre 2015 Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/80462>
- [21] The Guardian 15 September 2015 "Refugees scramble for ways into Europe as Hungary seals borders"; Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/15/refugees-scramble-fortress-europe-hungary-seals-borders?CMP=share_btn_url
- [22] UNHCR 2017. A Father's Desperate Sacrifice. Available at: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/a-father-s-desperate-sacrifice/>
- [23] Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2016. Hungary: Latest Amendments "legalise" extrajudicial push-back of asylum-seekers, in violation of EU and international law. Available at: <http://www.helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/HHC-info-update-push-backs-5-July-2016.pdf>
- [24] Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2016. Report on Asylum in Serbia. Available at: <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Pravo-na-azil-u-Republici-Srbiji-2016-FINAL-za-stampu.pdf>
- [25] Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2016.
- [26] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence; Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/agree_international/2017/1388/oj/eng
- [27] UNHCR 2016. European Migration Crisis Rapid Situation Update, 5 April 2016; Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/47296>
- [28] Interviews with 54 migrants in Serbia between 2015 and 2019.
- [29] UNHCR 2016.
- [30] UNHCR 2018. *Desperate Journeys. Refugees and Migrants Arriving in Europe and at Europe's Borders*. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/>
- [31] UNHCR 2018. Bosnia and Herzegovina United Nations country team (UNCT) Operational update refugee / migrant situation; 1 January to 16 February 2018. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/62460>
- [32] UNHCR 2025a. *Western Balkans - Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Other People in Mixed Movements*; Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114105>
- [33] UNHCR 2025b *Western Balkans - Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Other People in Mixed Movements*. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114752>
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] Agency is defined here as the resilience or adaptive strategies of migrants to achieve a goal, an aspiration. See Smit, S. 2022. *Agencit   de migrants extra-europ  ens face aux "fronti  res"*

juridiques dans le pays d'accueil: les réseaux comme ressources?, *Strathèse*, 9.

- [36] Adamson F., Tsourapas G. 2019. Migration Diplomacy in World Politics. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20(2), 113-128.
- [37] Telephone interview with Mr. Laurent Muschel, Director for Migration and Protection, DG Migrations and Home Affairs, conducted on October 30, 2017.
- [38] Blic, 2016. Ivanišević: Srbiji potrebna ozbiljna pomoć kako bi zadržala human pristup prema migrantima, 25. septembar 2016; Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/ivanisevic-srbiji-potrebna-ozbiljna-pomoc-kako-bi-zadrzala-human-pristup-prema/fsrx3b9>
- [39] Greenhill, K. M. 2010. *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*. Cornell University Press.
- [40] IPA I, II and III. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/serbia-financial-assistance-under-ipa-ii_en
- [41] MADAD 1 and 2. Available at: <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/srb-lat/projekti/arhiva/fond-madad>
- [42] EU Info Centre in Belgrade 2015. *Growing Together - The Most Successful EU Funded Projects in Serbia*. Available at: https://europa.rs/images/publikacije/Growing_Together.pdf
- [43] Multilateral and bilateral agreements between Serbia and EU and its member states. Available at: <https://europa.rs/podrska-eu-granicnoj-policiji-i-migrantima>
- [44] EU Info Centre in Belgrade 2015.
- [45] RTS, Tanjug 2017. Vučić: Srbija ne želi da bude parking za migrante, 13 Feb. Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:649830-Vucic-i-Kurc-Srbija-ne-zeli-da-bude-parking-za-migrante>

Author bio: Marija Pavicevic is a researcher at Sorbonne Paris Nord University, and a fellow of the Collaborative Institute on Migration (CI Migration) of Collège de France. She is an Assistant Professor of International Relations and the EU's external actions at the Catholic Institute of Paris and at the French Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations-INALCO. The title of her PhD thesis is "The challenges of international migration at the EU's borders: The case of Serbia" (2024). She is the author of the article "Sécurisation des frontières et criminalisation de passage sur la route des Balkans" *Sciences & Actions Sociales*, (2018) 9, 39-55. Her research focus is on European migration and asylum policies, European external borders, Refugees, Migration and International Relations, Migration diplomacy, Europeanization, and Externalization. Email: pavicevic_marija@yahoo.com

© 2025 Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits the user to copy, distribute, and transmit the work provided that the original author(s) and source are credited.