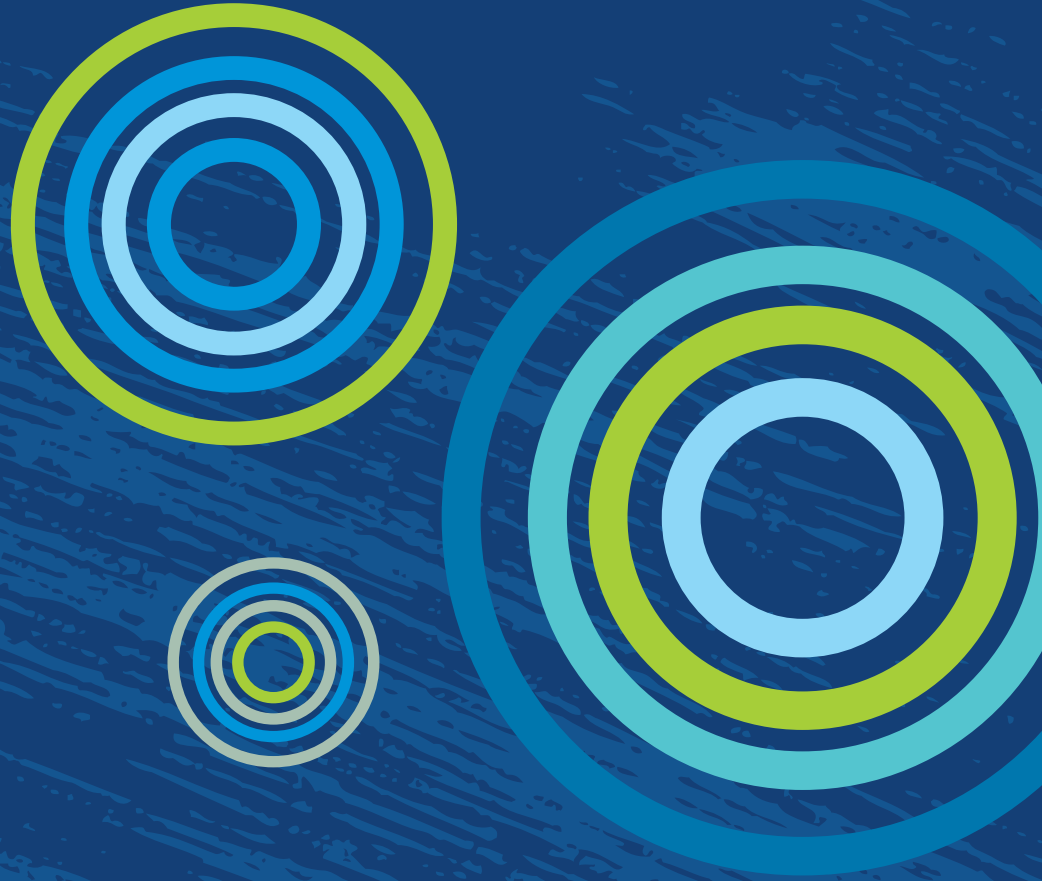




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## Policy Forum

# MIGRATION: FROM A EUROPEAN CHALLENGE TO A CATALYST OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

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**Tirana  
Initiative**

# INPUT

The stability and security of the European Union has been encountering multiple challenges since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis. A particularly pressing concern has been raised by the significant surge of refugee flows from the Middle East and North Africa, causing unceasing frictions and divisions between the EU member states on the adoption of coordinated measures to facing the enduring 'humanitarian disaster'.

As EU's proximate neighbours, the Western Balkan countries were propelled in the middle of this migration turmoil, holding little technical and financial capacities to properly respond to the unprecedented movement across borders. Moreover, attracted by the refugees' 'open door policy' of some member states, certain Western Balkan countries became themselves source of origin of migrants targeting the Schengen area, as an additional dimension to the refugee crisis.

Only in 2015 the number of illegal border-crossing migrants amounted to 764.038 transiting the so-called 'Western Balkan route', a 16-fold increase with respect to the previous year. In front of the constantly growing massive flow of people, the EU followed a reactive approach, by agreeing on temporary containing measures, as a consequence of the denial of the member states to respect the relocation quotas of the asylum-seekers.

Per se, the refugee crisis served as a litmus test for the European Union. It raised serious concerns on EU's ability to faire face to the constantly rising transnational challenges and showed the prevailing dependency of the Union on the Western Balkans and Turkey. Due to the refugee crisis, to a certain extent the EU altered into an (in)stability 'exporter'. Initially the migration burden was tacitly conveyed on the shoulders of the Western Balkan countries and then explicitly anchored to Turkey, for as long as the Union's internal disputes congested the adoption of a comprehensive and sustainable approach.

In addition, the refugee flux led to a substantial transformation of the traditional concept of migration. The general perception of migration as a human security issue – consisting in providing protection and assistance to the refugees – turned into a national security issue, which brought to light and further enhanced the embedded policy divisions between the EU member states. Ahead of this securitization phenomenon, there emerged the risk of 'legitimizing extraordinary responses', along with the predominance of certain national political agendas in some central European countries.

In the light of this multifaceted trans-border challenge, this first policy forum aims to bring together field experts, researchers and opinion-makers to discuss over the different aspects of the migration crisis, while highlighting the need for a holistic approach and coordinated global response. Moreover, the panel will reflect on the potentials of converting the migration issue into a catalyst of fruitful multilateral cooperation between the countries in the region and at the European level. To this purpose, the panellists of the policy forum will seek to address the following key questions, along with providing tailor-made recommendations for a sustainable management and solution of the migration issue:

- To what extent has the Union been consistent in achieving a common response to the refugee crisis?
- Are the Western Balkan countries the new guardians of the external borders of the Union?
- How can they convert the migration challenge in a catalyst for speeding up the integration process?

The first policy forum focused on the need to ensure a coherent, coordinated and comprehensive approach to the mass movement phenomenon of the last two years from the Middle East and North African countries towards the European continent. The discussion panel focused on the instruments that the European Union has adopted so as to tackle these fluxes, the concerns of the countries part of the migration route and the existing potentials of converting this jointly shared challenge into a catalyst for all-parties cooperation. In particular, the panel focused on two dimensions of the migration crisis, namely:

## ***1. Common response to the refugee crisis***

The EU did not manage to provide a common response to the refugee crisis, failing thus to meet the international obligations on the refugee status. Moreover, the establishment of the 'Western Balkan route', as a transit path towards some EU destination countries, is a consequence of the mismanagement of the crisis.

Some scholars argue that this migration challenge was actually a crisis of policies, namely the EU asylum and border management policies. The current shape of the EU asylum policy backs a highly and unequal responsibility-sharing between the member states at the external borders and in the mainland Europe. Whereas, the existing structural deficiencies in the EU border management policy leads to a heavy reliance upon the role of the neighbouring third countries, which are going through a series of destabilization, such as Libya and Turkey.

The failure to come up with a sustainable and timely solution; the uncertainty of some member states on the potential capacity to implementing any EU solution; the pressure from far right parties and conservative political elites; and the migration related fears and anxieties have led to unilateral restrictive actions among EU member states. The establishment of these different factions sheds light on the Union's conflict in interests between the member states and internal reciprocal vetoes on the reforming of the EU asylum system. In response, in front of this multifaceted challenge, some EU member states have opted for negotiating bilateral deals with several countries in EU's southern neighbourhood.

In front of this situation, what is achievable in terms of an EU common response is the deal to enlarge EURODAC (EU asylum fingerprint database) not only to the people who already requested asylum but to all irregular migrants coming into Europe. Furthermore, there is also an initiative to transform the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) into a fully-fledged EU agency with greater operational remit and a significant increase of the staff.

## ***2. Western Balkans as potential guardians of the external borders of the European Union***

The panellists unanimously agreed that the Western Balkans neither are nor can be the guardians of the southern borders of the EU. Within the context of a fragile of EU-Turkey deal, the Western Balkan countries cannot afford to convert into a buffer zone, both for their limited capacities and the stability and security of the region.

In 2015 for a brief moment the refugee crisis put the Western Balkans back on the political map of Europe, highlighting the strategic importance of the region for the EU. However, this impetus did not manage to accelerate the integration process of the region. At the moment there is an apparent paradox happening with the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. On the one hand some countries are progressing in their path to EU membership,

# OUTPUT

while on the other the level of democracy in the region is assessed as stagnating and in some cases backsliding. This shows that the reforms achieved till now in the Western Balkans are not irreversible.

Considering the nature and the embedded dimensions of the migration crisis, the Western Balkans countries should be careful not to attach any conditionality between their role in the crisis and their accession progress.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the migration crisis should not be seen as an opportunity. The Western Balkans should perceive it as a chance to improve the foundations of their integration process. As the countries still need to reform their states and societies, the crisis provides the opportunity to strengthen the border control and transnational police cooperation. It is also an occasion to harmonize the region's asylum, anti-trafficking and integration policies and laws with the rest of the EU member states. In addition, a stronger role of the civil society, such as in Serbia and Croatia, which acts as a partner to the state, is welcomed.

# DISCUSSION PANEL



**SRĐJAN CVIJIC** is a senior policy analyst of the Open Society European Policy Institute on EU external relations and a member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. Cvijic engages in analysis and advocacy concerning EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and Turkey, and in the Middle East and North Africa. He also engages in advocacy in the fields of rights, values, and international law. Cvijic has been engaged in EU policy work since 2005. Before joining the Open Society Foundations in 2015, he worked at the Association of Local Democracy Agencies, the European Policy Centre, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, and in the diplomatic service of the Republic of Serbia. He has published academic and policy-related articles on international public law, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law relative to EU foreign policy and EU enlargement issues. Cvijic holds a PhD from the Law Department of the European University Institute in Florence and an MA in international relations and European studies from Central European University in Budapest. He speaks English, French, Italian, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian.



**DIMITRIS SKLEPARIS** is a Research Associate at the University of Glasgow, and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). He completed his PhD in Political Science in the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary, University of London with a specialisation in irregular immigrants, asylum seekers and security. He has also completed an MSc in Social Science Research Methods at Bristol University and a BA in Communication and Media Studies at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He has published papers related to the securitisation of migration and asylum, migrant integration, migrant activism, far-right extremism, and migrant-/refugee-serving civil society actors in international journals and collective volumes.



**ERKA ÇARO** is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland and at the University of Tirana, Albania. She received her PhD in Population Studies from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands in 2011. She is the Principal Investigator and coordinator of the Regional Research Promotion Program funded project 'Industrial Citizenship and Labor Migration from Western Balkan, Cases of Albania and Kosovo migration to Germany, Switzerland and Greece' and is currently co-coordinating the Academy of Finland funded project "Industrial Citizenship and Labor Mobility in the EU: a Migrant Centered Study of Estonia-Finland and Albania-Italy Labor Mobility." Her research interests include areas such as migration, labor mobility, labor and migration politics, trade union relationships with migrants, gender studies, human and political geography, Western Balkans, Southern Europe.





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