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The Impact of Trump's Anti-Immigration Discourse on Asylum Applications in the Balkans (2017–2021)

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Abstract
Immigration has become an increasingly contentious political and social issue in Europe over the past decade. The growing influx of asylum seekers has been driven by deteriorating security conditions, armed conflicts, and political and economic instability in various regions, alongside the comparatively higher living standards in Europe. As a global hegemon, the United States has indirectly shaped migration patterns in peripheral regions such as the Balkans. This paper examines how President Donald Trump's anti-immigration discourse during his first term (2017–2021) coincided with an approximately 45% decrease in asylum applications from the Balkans. Drawing on official statistics and employing Critical Discourse Analysis, the study explores how US rhetoric influenced regional policy emulation. The findings underscore the transnational impact of populist discourse and call for a critical reassessment of migration governance in key transit regions.

Keywords
Immigration; Asylum; Balkans; Trump; Securitization; Migration Governance; Populism; Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

International migration has become a reality that affects almost every region of the world. People can now move more easily, more affordably, and more quickly in pursuit of employment, opportunities, education, and a higher standard of living. Whereas, in some cases, people are forced to flee their countries in search of a better future for themselves and their families abroad due to conflict, poverty, inequality, and a lack of stable employment (Cohen and Deng 2012). With its pledge to "leave no one behind," the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) acknowledges that international migration has a significant impact on the development of the nations of origin, transit, and destination and calls for comprehensive and cogent responses (Santino et al. 2022). SDG target 10.7 states that governments must "enable orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies" (UN ESCAP 2021). In addition, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG) aims to eradicate human trafficking, raise labour standards for migrant workers, and lower remittance transfer fees (Hagen-Zanker et al. 2022).

According to the most recent estimates of international migrants (as of mid-2020), nearly 281 million people resided outside of their country of birth (WMR 2022). This is roughly 128 million more than the estimated number in 1990 (153 million) and more than three times the number in 1970 (84 million). Over the years, the global population of international migrants has

increased steadily, from 173 million in 2000, 191 million in 2005, 220 million in 2010, 248 million in 2015, and 290 million in 2020. The stock of international migrants increased by an average of 2% annually between 2000 and 2005. The annual growth rate increased in the years 2005–2010, hitting 2.9%. Since then, though, it has slowed, dropping to about 2.4% annually between 2010 and 2015 and 2.0% between 2015 and 2017 (UN DESA 2024).

The phenomenon of immigration in Europe has become one of the major political and social problems, capturing the attention of policymakers, researchers, and the general public. In the past ten years, the continent has experienced periods of increase and decrease in asylum applications, mostly because of worsening security conditions in different parts of the world (Trauner 2018). Armed conflicts, political instability, and economic crises have led people to escape to Europe, which has softer living standards and much better economic opportunities (De Haas 2013). According to the International Organization for Migration's "World Migration Report" (2022), nearly 87 million international migrants were residing in Europe as of 2020. This implies a bit over a 15 percent increase from 2015, when approximately 75 million foreign migrants were living in the region. While 44 million were born in Europe but were living elsewhere in the region, this number has increased since 2015, rising from 38 million. Whereas, in 2020, the population of non-European migrants in Europe reached over 40 million. These migration patterns are not self-driven; they are part of larger geopolitical factors, such as the US' influence on immigration policies, which proves the relevance of this topic and the importance of conducting such research.

As a leader in the world economy and a global political superpower, the United States (US) wields significant power over migration patterns to Europe (Pieterse 2015). Factually, the asylum-seeking trends are heavily influenced by US foreign policy and diplomatic engagements abroad, which is the main hypothesis set in this study.

Notably, the data published by Eurostat reveals that asylum applications dropped during President Trump's first term; thereafter, they skyrocketed between 2021 and 2023. This trend resembles the migration surges during 2014 to 2016 (Ekhtiari et al. 2023). This correlation begs vital questions about how much US leadership and its policy decisions play a role in migratory flows to Europe. The immigration policies of the United States and Europe were similar. At one point in their respective histories, both have supported a more liberal immigration policy (Casanova 2007). Nonetheless, as of 2025, the societies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean are becoming increasingly concerned about the influx of new immigrants. Both the US and the EU heard an increasing number of voices calling for stricter immigration laws after the events of 9/11, the 2015 refugee crisis, and Donald Trump's election (Funk and Shaw 2021). Anti-immigrant parties have been gaining popularity across Europe, driven by a wave of terrorist attacks and rising crime rates in several European capitals. Although the number of migrants entering the United States and Europe had declined by late 2018, the political and social impacts continue to be felt on both continents.

Concerning this, the securitization of immigration, an entrenched concept within American and European political discourse, has resulted in asylum seekers being positioned as threats to security, rather than in need of protection (Kopytowska and Grabowski 2017). This reframing has encouraged anti-immigrant movements, affecting domestic policies, which led to favoring border management at the expense of humanitarian concerns (Miron 2020). In addition, Trump's statements heightened preexisting concerns about migration and

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strengthened strict asylum policies throughout the continent (Trucios-Haynes and Michael 2018). Whereas Europe continues to see significant inflows of asylum seekers due to geopolitical crises, the indirect impact of US foreign policy on these migration patterns has received insufficient attention. Particularly, the United States' political rhetoric and foreign engagements appear to have had measurable effects on migratory flows. However, this nexus has not been thoroughly investigated in light of recent European asylum trends. Hence, apprehending the link between international political rhetoric and migration policy is critical to developing effective, humane migration governance. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how anti-immigration rhetoric shapes international migration policies and how it affects asylum seekers in transit areas like the Balkans. Furthermore, the paper adds to the growing body of research on migration securitisation by shedding light on how US policy discourse influences European responses, particularly in areas with high migratory pressure. The following text further explores the literature on anti-immigration rhetoric, aiming to assess how political discourse has shaped migration narratives and influenced policy contexts in both the United States and Europe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over time, scholars have analyzed rhetoric as a tool of persuasion in political contexts, with particular focus on issues related to immigration. Aristotle's concepts of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* have been extensively applied to political discourse analysis, including immigration policy (Fernández-Ulloa and del Carmen López-Ruiz 2023). Immigration has been a divisive issue, particularly in the United States during the first Trump administration (2017–2021). Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric heightened border security and implemented strict asylum policies, significantly impacting global migration dynamics (Campani et al. 2022).

Trump's rhetoric predominantly utilized *ethos*, portraying himself as the defender of American sovereignty, and *pathos*, evoking fear and nationalist sentiments (Charteris-Black 2018). This approach has parallels with right-wing populist ideologies in European politics, including the Balkans, which often emphasize nationalist sentiments (Zúquete 2018). Trump's narratives surrounding migration influenced policy adaptations in Balkan countries, which can be examined through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2013). Strauss and Feiz (2013) argue that CDA seeks to expose how language upholds power structures, often under the guise of common-sense assumptions and everyday practices. Studies employing CDA have revealed how rhetorical devices like hyperbole, metaphor, and negative framing portray immigrants as dangerous, undeserving, and unworthy of rights (Van Dijk 2015; Hardt-Mautner 1995; Mehan 1997; Baker and McEnery 2005; Bloodsworth-Lugo 2014; Quinonez 2018; Wodak 2015).

Fairclough (2001) posits that in modern society, the exercise of power is increasingly achieved through ideology, particularly through the ideological workings of language. A study of 140 million words of UK press articles found numerous negative representational categories and a tendency to conflate terms related to immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers (Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery 2013). Similarly, a corpus-based study of British newspapers discovered recurring linguistic choices used to negatively frame refugees, describing them as "packages, invaders, pests, or water" (Baker and McEnery 2005).

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Migration rhetoric can also be analyzed through securitization theory, which posits that political agents frame migration as an existential security risk necessitating exceptional measures (Huysmans 2000). The characterization of migrants as criminals aligns with this theory, rationalizing stricter immigration laws and influencing narratives in Balkan nations. Additionally, the agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1974) accounts for how media framing of Trump's policies affected Balkan migration policies, enforcing strict border policies and shaping public attitudes against asylum seekers. These theoretical perspectives elucidate how political discourse affects asylum policies and social attitudes.

Taken together, the theoretical frameworks employed CDA, securitization theory, and agenda-setting form a triangulated lens through which to understand both the language of power and the mechanisms of policy diffusion. CDA unpacks the symbolic and ideological construction of migrants as threats; securitization theory then explains how this discursive framing enables extraordinary state measures such as militarized borders (Muro 2024), while agenda-setting theory tracks how political and media actors selectively elevate certain threats into public consciousness. When applied to the Balkan context, this triangulation reveals not only the diffusion of Trump-era narratives but also the strategic incentives for Balkan governments to align with US ideological positions in order to signal competence, gain geopolitical favor, or secure future diplomatic leverage.

Studies have highlighted the restrictive nature of Trump's immigration policies, such as the travel ban targeting asylum seekers from Muslim countries, the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) complicating asylum applications, and reduced refugee admissions impacting global asylum policies (Elias 2021). These policies have contributed to the perception that applying for asylum is a dishonorable procedure, fueling anti-immigration sentiment globally. Consequently, Balkan nations, historically transit areas for asylum seekers, have strengthened border controls and restrictive asylum policies (Póczik and Sárik 2018). For instance, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have tightened border controls and dismissed more asylum requests, while Croatia has increased unauthorized deportations to Bosnia and Serbia (Hodžić 2020). The hardline immigration policies of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary further illustrate how Trump's rhetoric resonated with right-wing governments in the Balkans.

Parallels between Trump's anti-immigration policy, particularly its emphasis on border fortification and the externalization of asylum procedures, have been identified in comparative studies that draw analogies between the US–Mexico and EU–Morocco border regimes (Ardalan 2020).

Conversely, another study presents a nuanced comparative analysis of the anti-immigration rhetorical strategies employed by two prominent contemporary right-wing populist figures: the US President Donald Trump during his first term and Italian League leader Matteo Salvini (Lorenzetti 2020). Moreover, Trump's immigration discourse has had an indirect yet notable impact on European Union Member States by emboldening radical-right political actors, who have adopted similar nationalist and exclusionary frameworks, thus influencing the trajectory of EU foreign policy deliberations on migration (Arjakas et al. 2024).

While a growing body of literature has explored the influence of US immigration policies on European states, particularly in the context of transatlantic policy diffusion, there remains a significant and underexplored gap concerning the specific effects of the Trump administration's migration policies on asylum governance in the Balkan region. Existing research tends to

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generalize European responses or focus predominantly on Western Europe, thereby overlooking the unique geopolitical and socio-political dynamics of Southeastern Europe.

This paper seeks to address this lacuna by examining how the rhetoric and policy direction of the Trump administration, marked by its nationalistic discourse and deterrence-based approach to migration, have shaped, directly or indirectly, migration governance in the Balkan countries. This inquiry is especially pertinent given the complex interplay between external pressures and domestic political agendas in the region, which can both resist and replicate global migration trends.

Moreover, with President Donald J. Trump now beginning his second term, the issue has gained renewed urgency. His administration's renewed emphasis on stringent border controls and the reversal of previous immigration framework, such as the immediate detention of undocumented individuals accused of theft or violent crimes, and the dismantling of what he characterizes as lenient Biden-era policies, signals a continuation and potential intensification of restrictive migration paradigms (White House 2025). This context not only reinforces the need for a critical assessment of the broader implications of US migration rhetoric beyond its borders but also highlights the timeliness and relevance of this study within the evolving global policy landscape, reminding us that, to understand the future, we must first deconstruct the past.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a comprehensive critical analysis of publicly available data, encompassing sources from Eurostat, international organizations operating in the field of migration issues, and relevant national institutions within individual countries. It presents and interprets information on the number of asylum seekers per year, alongside their countries of origin, across the ten countries of the Balkan Peninsula, intending to identify migration trends during the first term of President Trump's administration, responding to the main objective - to ascertain whether his foreign policy and anti-migration rhetoric have exerted any discernible influence on the migration dynamics within the Balkans.

Furthermore, the study incorporates data on the number of Ukrainian nationals registered for temporary protection or equivalent schemes, which were activated in response to the war in Ukraine that erupted in 2022. In addition to the critical examination of quantitative data, this article also partly employs a comparative analysis, contrasting migration flow trends to the Balkans during the first Trump presidency with those under President Biden. This comparative approach seeks to elucidate potential factors contributing to the observed differences in migration patterns between the two periods.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The immigration issue has become a contemporary political and social topic, arousing the interest of societies in Europe over the past 10 years. As already mentioned, among the main reasons for the increased number of people seeking asylum on the old continent are the deteriorating security environment, in which armed conflicts, political instability and crises are observed on the one hand, and the relatively better social and living conditions and purely economic conditions in Europe. The US, as a global hegemon with the ability to exert influence

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in various regions around the world, has the power to shape migration processes to Europe. In this regard, Eurostat data shows that during President Trump's first term, there was a significant decrease in the number of asylum applications at the European Union level. At the same time, in the period 2021-2023, it increased tremendously, similar to the peak of 2014-2016, better known as the European migration crisis. Potential reasons for this might be found in the rhetoric of the different US administrations on the issue, as well as in the shifts in conducting international policy.

Balkans, as an integral part of the continent of Europe, are just as affected by migration processes as the EU as a whole. Moreover, one of the key immigration routes to Europe is through the Western Balkans. This path covers territories of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia and other countries from the Western Balkan region, on which the reported migrants are mostly Syrians, Turks, and Afghans, according to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex 2025). However, before conducting some analysis and assumptions, it is worth clarifying the exact boundaries of the region and specifically which countries it encompasses. In this regard, it is important to highlight that there is no universal agreement on the region's components. Some sources define the Balkans as comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia, with all or parts of these countries located within the Balkan Peninsula (Britannica 2025).

On the other hand, the European Parliament (EP) uses a different classification. Moreover, the European Union (EU) has developed a policy aimed at supporting the gradual integration of the so-called Western Balkan region into the EU. According to EP, among the Western Balkan countries are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia. Nevertheless, it is important to note that none of these countries is a member of the EU, and therefore, for this paper, migration processes in the broader sense of the Balkan Peninsula, encompassing 10 countries, are analyzed.

To assess whether migratory pressure in these countries correlates with different US administrations, the number of asylum applications submitted is presented in Figure 1 for the period 2016–2024.

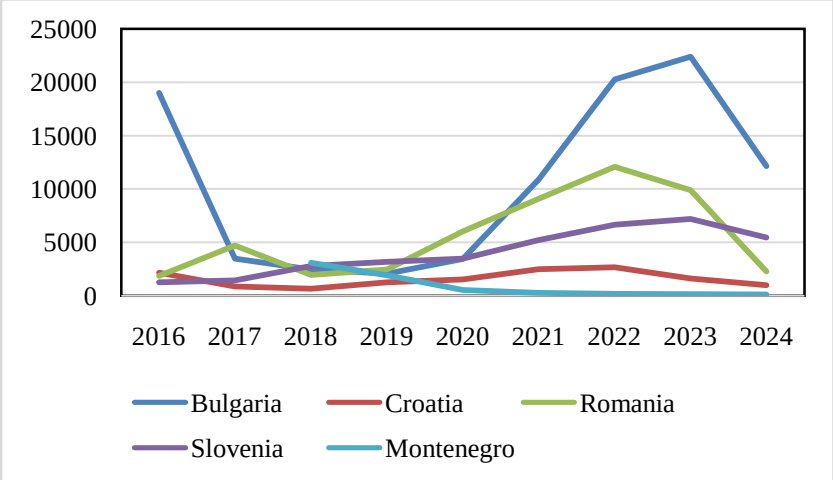


Figure 1: Annual Number of First-Time Asylum Applications in Selected Balkan Peninsula Countries (2016–2024) (Source: Eurostat 2025)

The levels of migration pressure on the countries of the Balkan Peninsula were significantly lower in the period 2016-2020, corresponding to the first administration of President Trump. An important clarification is that the data in Figure 1 do not cover all ten countries on the peninsula, as some fall outside Eurostat's scope. The first period corresponds to Trump's first term in office. However, it can be pointed out that the total number of asylum applications submitted in the five countries included in the chart during President Trump's first term amounted to 71,640, while that for the period 2021-2024 (President Biden's administration) amounted to 131,945. Expressed in percentage terms, asylum applications increased by 45.7% during Biden's presidency. Over the entire nine-year period, 35.2% of applications were filed during Trump's presidency, compared to 64.8% during Biden's time in office.

On the other hand, the data presented in Figure 2 allows us to draw conclusions about which countries are most affected by migration processes. Over the entire period from 2016 to 2024, the highest number of asylum applications was recorded in Bulgaria, with 96,130 applications, followed by Romania with 50,250, Slovenia with 36,645, Croatia with 14,285, and finally Montenegro with only 6,275.

To examine the situation in the remaining Balkan countries, statistical data from other international organizations operating in their territories were collected. For instance, the European Council for Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) prepares annual reports about the migration situation in Serbia. According to their findings, there are 2,225 applications for asylum in total in Serbia between 2016 and 2023, which makes the country poorly affected by these processes (ECRE 2024). A potential reason for the comparatively lower number of people seeking asylum in Serbia is the fact that it is primarily a transit point for refugees and migrants on their way to Western Europe, as stated by some organizations (UNICEF 2021). The same goes for North Macedonia, as it has 2,396 first-time asylum applications for the period 2016-2023 (IOM 2022a; UNHCR 2024).

Contrary to the trends in North Macedonia and Serbia, where the total number of asylum seekers for the period does not exceed a negligible 2,500 people, in Albania, it amounted to 16,623 for the period 2016-2023 (Instat 2025). What is particularly striking is that, in most years, the numbers are insignificant, yet peaks occurred in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021—periods when the situation in Europe appeared relatively calm. During these years, Albania recorded 4,386, 6,557, 2,232, and 2,533 asylum applications, respectively. In percentage terms, this means that in just four years, Albania registered 94.5% of all asylum seekers in the period 2016-2023. Regarding the nationalities of the newcomers and more specifically those registering as asylum seekers in Albania during this peak period, it can be mentioned that in the three years up to and including 2020, the most numerous were Syrians and Iraqis, while in 2021 (98.6%) they were Afghans (Instat 2018; Instat 2019; Instat 2020; Instat 2021). Among the potential reasons for the great interest in finding asylum in Albania, even though the country is not a member of the EU and therefore newcomers there do not have access to the social benefits that EU Member States offer, is the religious and cultural similarity. The latter refers to the fact that the share of Muslims in Albania amounts to nearly 60% of the total population (US Department of State 2021).

The same applies to Kosovo, where the Muslim population share is even higher than in Albania, at approximately 93% (US Department of State 2022). As for the institution that collects data on asylum seekers in Kosovo, it is the Ministry of Internal Affairs. According to their reports, the total number of registered asylum applications in the country from 2013 to 2017 was 691,

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and for the period 2018-2023, 5,393, with an ostensible peak in 2019, 2,081 asylum seekers (Republic of Kosovo Ministry of Internal Affairs 2025). Among the remaining Balkan countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, like the other ex-Yugoslav republics, including Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, exhibits a notably lower rate of asylum applications, especially when compared to nations such as Bulgaria and Romania. According to a report of the Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2024), there were 3,519 asylum seekers in the country for the whole period 2016-2023, with a slight increase in 2018 when 1,568 people seeking protection were recorded. However, it is worth stressing that, like Albania and Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina also has a predominant Muslim population - approximately 51% (US Department of State 2016).

While there has been a discernible increase in the number of asylum applications lodged in several countries between 2018 and 2020, particularly in instances where the corresponding levels within the EU are lower, such as in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it would be inaccurate to attribute this trend to specific international events. Instead, it appears to reflect a broader intra-European movement of individuals with comparable status. Furthermore, the redirection of asylum seekers to these specific countries is likely attributable to cultural and religious affinities, as it is evident that these nations are predominantly Muslim. Given the fact that asylum seekers in Europe typically originate from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, such similarities may play a significant role in influencing their destination choices.

One of the primary factors contributing to the relatively subdued migratory pressure on Europe during the first term of the Trump administration is its predominantly domestic policy orientation, which prioritized enhancing the US economic performance over the global dissemination of the American values of democracy and security promotion through military intervention in various regions. The wars that Trump is waging are comparative and, in most cases, short, as is the case in 2017 in Syria (Prakash 2017).

However, to explore whether there is a relationship between US foreign policy and migration trends to Europe, Figure 2 presents the most common nationalities of newcomers in the Balkan countries.

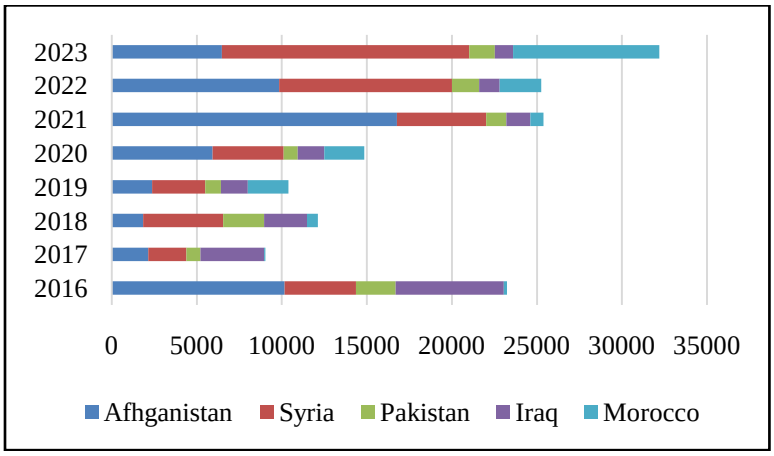


Figure 2: Most Common Countries of Origin of Asylum Applicants in Balkan Peninsula Countries (2016–2023) (Source: Authors' calculations based on data from Eurostat 2025; Instat 2025; IOM 2022; Republic of Kosovo Ministry of Internal Affairs 2025; Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024)

As shown in Figure 2, there is considerable variation in the nationalities of asylum seekers arriving in the Balkan countries. In 2016, for example—when Europe was nearing the end of the so-called migration crisis of the mid-2010s and President Trump began his first term—the largest group of asylum seekers were Afghans, numbering 10,169. They were followed by Iraqis with 6,363 and Syrians with 4,187. A likely reason for the significant presence of Iraqis and Syrians that year is the aftermath of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed conflicts that spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s, notably impacting both Syria and Iraq.

However, an explanation for the significant number of Afghans can be found in the deteriorating political, social and economic situation in the country itself, which has not been particularly favourable for a long time. The share of Afghan asylum seekers is increasing rapidly in 2021 and 2022, reaching 16,759 and 9,843. This surge occurred as a result of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, and the subsequent Taliban takeover of control of the country and the government in Kabul (Center for Preventive Action 2025). This was one of the first foreign policy decisions of President Biden's administration, which, combined with his more liberal attitude on migration issues, also influenced the flow of people to Europe, including the Balkan region. Moreover, it is crucial to emphasize that Afghans not only represent the largest group in 2021 but also constitute the highest overall number for the period, totalling 55,556. They are followed by Syrians with 48,374, Iraqis at 19,476, Moroccans with 17,448, and, lastly, Pakistanis, who number 11,601.

An important clarification is that the data analyzed above do not include people who emigrated as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022. Information on this indicator is presented in Figure 3.

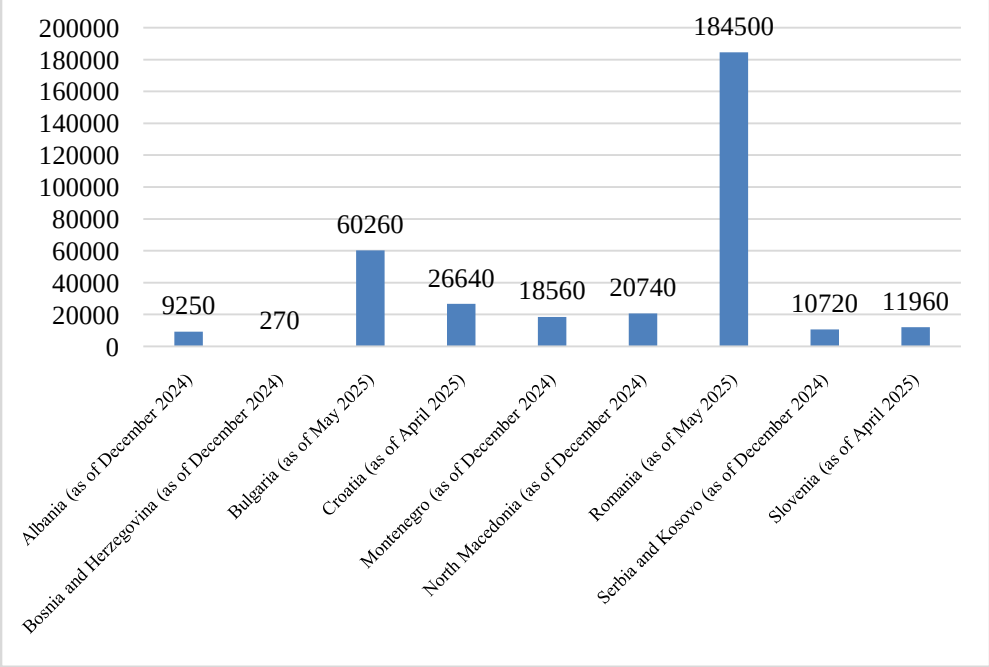


Figure 3: Refugees from Ukraine Recorded in Balkan Countries
(Source: UNHCR Operational Data Portal 2025)

As illustrated in Figure 3, Bulgaria and Romania have been disproportionately affected by the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which escalated during President Biden's administration. These two countries find themselves in a challenging position, tasked with managing significantly larger and more complex mixed migration flows. The combined total of asylum seekers from the MENA region, together with the influx of Ukrainian refugees, has resulted in a significant rise in migrant numbers: Bulgaria has received 156,390 individuals, while Romania has seen 234,750 arrivals. This increased burden highlights the critical role these countries play in Europe's broader response to displacement caused by the war, making them the most affected among the Balkan countries.

However, even though in this case the Russian Federation is the aggressor, invading the inviolable territory of another country, forcing millions of people to flee, as a result of the war that has begun, a significant number of Russian citizens have sought safer living conditions in other countries. Such is the case with Serbia, for example, a country often characterized as a Russian ally (Proroković 2020). This statement is proved by the Asylum Information Database (AIDA 2022) report, according to which "more than 200,000 Russian citizens arrived in Serbia after the conflict in Ukraine started." In addition to the fact that this significant influx creates the typical challenges that are observed with the arrival of asylum seekers of other nationalities, the report adds that this mass influx of Russians "created a turbulence in the real estate market and a sharp increase in rents."

While the quantitative patterns confirm a decline in asylum applications during Trump's first term, interpreting these trends through the theoretical lens reveals deeper structural undercurrents. The policy choices of Balkan countries seem to reflect not only responses to migrant flows but also proactive political alignment with prevailing geopolitical narratives. Here, securitization functions not merely as a reactive measure but as a strategic tool, whereby constructing the asylum seeker as the "other" enables states to consolidate internal authority and demonstrate alignment with US power. CDA further reveals how domestic leaders adapted Trump's language tropes of criminality, chaos, and contagion to justify their restrictive migration regimes, often with little empirical grounding but high public appeal (Phillips 2023).

Regardless of the reason and motives, migration, when forced, creates inconveniences both for the people themselves, forced to leave their countries of origin, and for the receiving countries, and the US, as a global hegemon, has the power to stimulate or reduce these processes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, early signals from President Trump's second term suggest a consolidation, and possible intensification, of the hardline migration policies that characterized his first administration (Burrows and Braml 2025). Renewed executive orders aimed at curbing irregular migration, along with proposed expansions in border surveillance and transnational enforcement partnerships, reflect a continuity with earlier approaches, including policies reminiscent of the "Remain in Mexico" framework (Rizzo 2024). Central to this strategy is the externalization of migration control, particularly through the rhetorical and policy shift of assigning responsibility for refugee processing to transit states. This mirrors longstanding EU practices and contributes to a global diffusion of deterrence-based migration governance.

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For the Balkan countries, such transnational signalling is not without precedent. During Trump's first term and in the broader context of rising global restrictionism, Balkan governments responded with a pattern of anticipatory alignment, tightening borders, enacting more restrictive asylum procedures, and exhibiting limited legislative commitment to refugee integration. These responses were shaped in part by diplomatic messaging and the framing of migration as a sovereignty issue, a narrative that continues to resonate among Balkan policymakers and is once again being echoed in early 2025 US government communications. As Burrows and Braml (2025) note, this alignment is not merely reactive but speaks to a deeper ideological compatibility rooted in shared emphasis on national control and border security.

The reduction in asylum seeker arrivals to the Balkans observed during Trump's first term was likely influenced by this combination of US foreign policy shifts and the broader populist narrative he championed regarding migration, particularly toward the United States. This rhetoric gained substantial traction across Europe during the mid-2010s, a period initially marked by the so-called "open door" policy in many EU Member States. However, by the decade's end, a significant policy transformation had occurred. Scholars such as Olejárová (2018) have argued that this shift was driven by changing public attitudes and the electoral rise of nationalist movements, both of which contributed to a more restrictive policy climate. As a result, migration patterns and asylum channels, including those through the Balkans, were realigned in ways that reflected the wider ripple effects of Trump-era policies and the global reassertion of immigration restrictionism.

Going forward, Balkan policymakers will likely face increasing pressure to harmonize their security priorities with the principles of international refugee protection. The challenge lies in constructing a governance model that upholds state sovereignty while avoiding the erosion of humanitarian obligations. Aligning with global standards such as those outlined in SDG 10.7, which calls for safe, orderly, and responsible migration, may involve bolstering financial support for humane asylum reception facilities and fostering discursive strategies that resist the populist framing of migrants as threats.

As Trump's second term unfolds, it offers a critical opportunity to study the real-time diffusion of political rhetoric into policy practice across international borders. Notably, it raises the question of whether regions like the Balkans are merely passive recipients of dominant external discourses or whether they act as active amplifiers, translating and embedding foreign rhetoric into domestic contexts for political gain. In this regard, combining discourse theory with policy transfer literature could significantly enrich scholarly understandings of transnational populist contagion, particularly in how migration governance is increasingly shaped not only by material pressures but also by the symbolic and ideational dynamics of global political influence.

This study primarily relies on Critical Discourse Analysis and policy documents available up to early 2025, which may limit the ability to capture ongoing developments in real time. Additionally, while the focus on the Balkans provides valuable regional insights, the findings may not fully generalize to other geopolitical contexts with different migration dynamics. Finally, access to detailed internal policy deliberations in Balkan countries was limited, constraining the analysis to publicly available sources and potentially overlooking behind-the-scenes factors influencing policy alignment.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Vasil Pavlov: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing-original draft, writing-review and editing, visualization, funding acquisition. **Siddharth Kanojia:** conceptualization, resources, writing - original draft, writing - review and editing, visualization, formal analysis.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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AI Declaration:
The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools—specifically ChatGPT-4—to assist in enhancing the clarity and quality of the English language in this manuscript. These AI tools were employed solely for language refinement and were not involved in the conceptualization, analysis, or development of the scientific content. The authors assume full responsibility for the manuscript's originality, accuracy, validity, and integrity.

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