States and Migration: The Human Movement Podcast
Episode 28 "Inside the Balkan Route: 30 Years of Migration, EU Policy, and Smuggling – With Donatella Bradić (IOM)"

Enhanced Transcript

By Emmanuel Comte – with the assistance of Andriana Lagoudes

Abstract: Why does the Balkan Route remain a strategic corridor for migrants entering the EU? In this interview, Emmanuel Comte speaks with Donatella Bradić, Senior Program Coordinator at IOM, who reflects on three decades managing migration in the Western Balkans. From the Yugoslav wars to digital smuggling networks and EU border reforms, this episode explores the evolution of the route, the role of the IOM, and the future of EU migration governance. Topics include regional diplomacy, unaccompanied minors, biometric registration, externalization of asylum, and the rise of labor migration in the Balkans.

Disclaimer: *This transcript has been produced for educational purposes to support the understanding and integration of information discussed in the related conversation. It is not intended for use in quoting the conversation verbatim. For accurate quotations, please refer to the original recording.*

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: Why have the Western Balkans remained a key corridor for irregular migration into the European Union for more than three decades?

Despite repeated efforts to manage and contain the flow, the route continues to adapt. Shaped by conflict, economic pressures, and shifting borders, it remains active and significant. In this interview, I speak with Donatella Bradić, Senior Program Coordinator for the Western Balkans at the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Since joining the IOM in 1992, she has followed migration developments in the region through all major turning points—from the disintegration of Yugoslavia to today's ongoing transit movements. Over the course of this conversation, we discuss how migration practices have evolved over time, how the Balkan route currently operates, and how IOM's role in the region has changed.

We also examine the relationships between international organizations, national governments, and EU agencies in shaping migration policy, as well as the implications of prospective EU accession for future migration governance. This conversation offers grounded insights into migration management in the Western Balkans, European migration policy, regional development, and the hands-on work of international organizations.

So, Ms. Bradić, thank you very much for joining us and taking part in this interview.

Donatella Bradić: Thank you for having me. It's a real pleasure to reflect on the themes you mentioned in your introduction.

As you rightly pointed out, this region has experienced significant changes and complex dynamics. The adaptability of both the migration flows and the responses to them has been fascinating to observe and analyze.

From Conflict to Career - Personal Journey

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, and you're joining us today from Sarajevo, where you're currently based. Let's begin by zooming in on your personal journey. How did you come to focus on migration in your career?

Donatella Bradić: I started working for IOM at the beginning of my professional career in 1992, quite by chance—or perhaps by luck. I'm originally from the Western Balkans; I was born in Croatia.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, this became an area of great relevance and interest for me. When the war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, I became actively involved in responding to the refugee crisis. It felt like the right way to begin my career, and I was fortunate to start with IOM.

Emmanuel Comte: So it was really the conflicts in Yugoslavia that sparked your interest in refugee issues?

Donatella Bradić: Yes, exactly. Part of my background and heritage is mixed, and I have always been affected by borders and migration. That personal experience naturally led me to be interested in issues of migration, equality, and equity—challenges that so many migrants face. For me, it's not just a career, but a deeply personal choice.

Evolving Migration Practices

Emmanuel Comte: You've been with IOM since 1992. In your view, how have migration practices in the Western Balkans changed over the years? What were the key turning points?

And by "migration practices," I mean both the movement of people and the management of those movements.

Donatella Bradić: Two major periods define how the region has responded to migration.

First, the response in the 1990s was heavily influenced by the wars and the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Violent conflict created large numbers of refugees. These people were mostly of the same or similar origin and spoke the same language. The response focused on reception and accommodation, and often on finding durable solutions. In many cases, people never returned to their countries of origin after the conflict. That was especially true in Serbia, and to some extent in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 2015, during the mixed migration movements, the situation was very different. Although the number of arrivals was similar—about one million people—the context was not the same. At one point, a similar number passed through Serbia in the 1990s.

These were people from different cultural backgrounds, religions, and languages. Everything was different. The solidarity of the population may have remained, but the ability or willingness of the authorities to integrate these individuals or seek durable solutions was not what it had been in the 1990s.

Authorities viewed this more as a transit situation—temporary in nature. However, when the route was closed, it became evident that this was not a temporary issue. Migration and movement would continue and could not simply be stopped.

So, adaptation was necessary. Authorities had to begin considering rights-based solutions. That also meant providing a range of services, especially for vulnerable individuals like unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking, women, and families.This journey of adapting to migration realities is ongoing and continues to evolve even today.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, I completely agree with the transition you described. We've moved from localized flows, triggered by the war in Yugoslavia, involving people who were former Yugoslav nationals, to a globalization of migration in the Western Balkans.

Donatella Bradić: Correct.

Anatomy of the Balkan route

Emmanuel Comte: Now, people are coming from various countries in Africa and Asia. And as you mentioned, it's not just a change in the profile of migrants—the challenges surrounding these migration flows have also evolved. Various problems, which were not prominent in the early stages, are now very much present.

You mentioned the Balkan route. Let's explore that concept a bit further. Could you elaborate on what the Balkan route is? How does it function for migrants coming from outside the region, most of whom are aiming to reach northern and western Europe?

How many people use this route? Where do they go along the way? Why do they choose this path?

Donatella Bradić: The Balkan route predates the 2015 migration wave. Refugees and migrants have been moving through the Balkans for many years. For instance, people from Eastern Europe—such as Romania and Bulgaria—sought refuge in Serbia and former Yugoslavia long before its disintegration. In fact, the UNHCR had a mandate to assist refugees in former Yugoslavia starting as early as the 1960s.

So, there has been a longstanding tradition in the region of hosting people seeking refuge. However, the scale was never as large as it became in 2015.

The 2015 surge was triggered by the Syrian conflict and other global crises. At the beginning of that period, most people crossing through the Balkans were Syrian nationals aiming for EU countries—Germany in particular. We all remember the images of large groups of people transiting through open borders.

Refugees at Vienna West Railway Station during the European migrant crisis, 5 September 2015.

When European and Western Balkan countries decided to formally close the route—meaning they no longer permitted open transit—migration did not stop. People continued to move, albeit less visibly.

This change led to the emergence of organized smuggling networks, which created new revenue streams for criminal groups. These networks have grown more sophisticated and adept at circumventing restrictions.

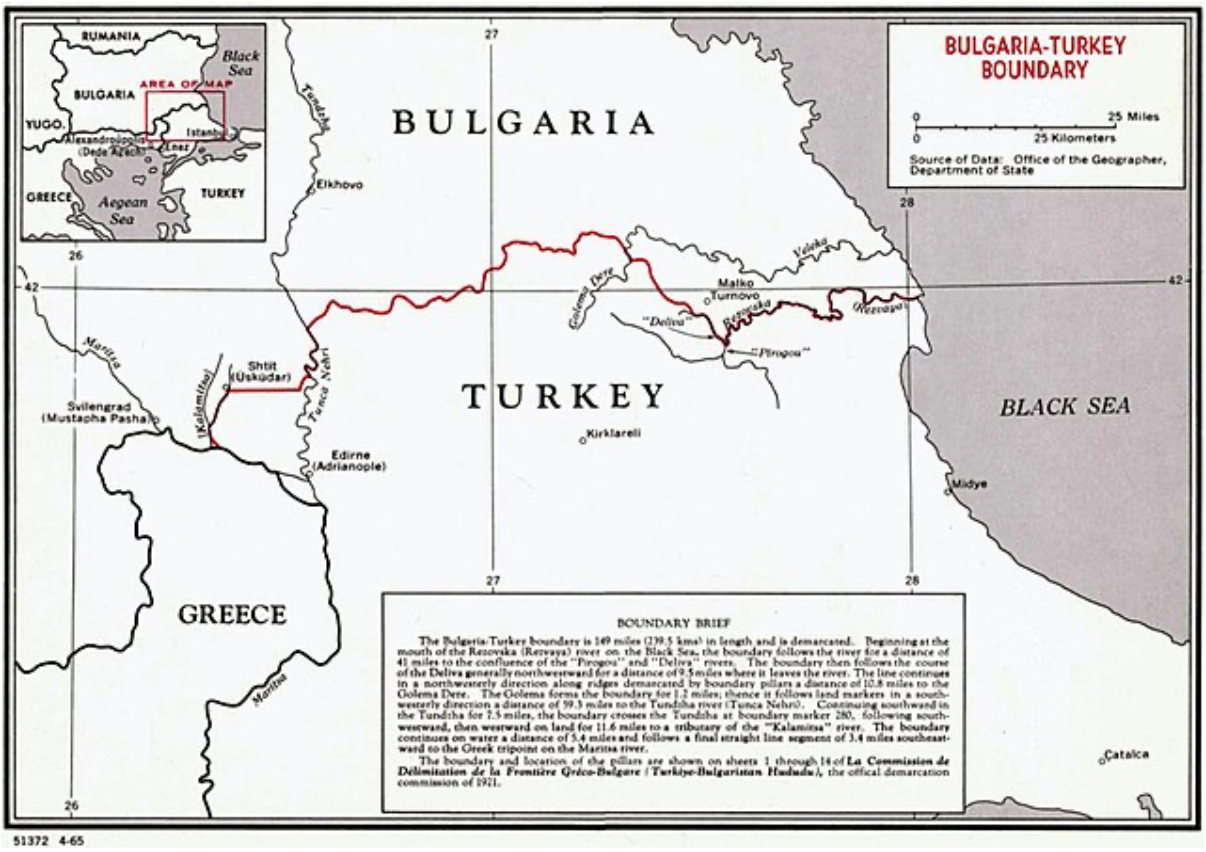
Border controls and security at the borders have remained relatively consistent over the years. In 2023, approximately 120,000 individuals crossed the borders of the Western Balkans irregularly. This means they did not go through official border crossing points, nor did they necessarily possess passports or national documents, yet they managed to transit through countries like Bosnia, Serbia, and North Macedonia, eventually entering the EU.

The nationalities of these migrants have also shifted over time. While Syrians made up the majority in 2015–2016, more recent years have seen an increase in Afghans and Iraqis. Lately, North Africans—especially Moroccans—have become the third-largest group traveling along these routes.

Two major factors have influenced these shifts in routes and nationalities. First is the adaptation of the visa policy regimes in the Western Balkans to align with EU standards. Many visa-free regimes had to be revoked or modified. For instance, a visa-free arrangement between

Serbia and Iran led to a surge in Iranian nationals using the Western Balkan route in 2016. This prompted Serbia, under EU pressure, to reinstate visa requirements for Iranians. Similar adjustments were made for nationals from Burundi, India, and Cuba. Consequently, the presence of these nationalities along the route has significantly diminished.

Second is the visa regime in Türkiye. Türkiye currently maintains a visa-free policy with over 110 countries. This allows many individuals to enter Türkiye—especially via Istanbul—without needing a visa. From there, they can easily move onward toward the Western Balkans en route to the EU.



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Over the years, we've observed nationals from Egypt, Morocco, and other countries flying into Istanbul, where they establish contacts and find networks that help them cross the borders through the Western Balkans.

Between 2015 and 2025, we've witnessed the evolution of organized smuggling mechanisms. These are increasingly sophisticated systems capable of circumventing border controls and facilitating irregular migration across the region.

Emmanuel Comte: That's a fascinating insight into how the route functions. It's indeed counterintuitive to see Moroccans using the Western Balkan route, especially since their primary destinations are often Western European countries like France and Belgium.

Does this have to do with the visa regime in Türkiye or previously in Serbia? From what I understand, Serbia has since updated its legislation, leaving Türkiye as the main country with a liberal visa regime.

Donatella Bradić: Yes, that's correct. Türkiye still maintains a broad visa-free regime. Given the strategic importance of Istanbul's airport as a major international hub, it makes sense that

migrants would transit through Türkiye and then continue via the Western Balkans through various pathways.

Emmanuel Comte: You mentioned the figure of 120,000 irregular crossings in 2023. Estimating irregular migration is always a challenge. How did you arrive at that number?

Donatella Bradić: There are several methodologies used for data collection. One is based on detections and registrations by national authorities, either within national territory or at temporary reception facilities established for this purpose. These figures are provided by national governments and verified through organizations such as IOM and Frontex. The numbers are broadly consistent across sources like Frontex's published figures.

Biometric registration is another important method. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, around 90% of irregular migrants who seek any kind of support from authorities are fingerprinted and entered into a database. However, the rate of registration varies by country—Albania has one of the lowest registration rates due to the rapid pace of crossings, and Serbia is somewhere around 40–50%.

Emmanuel Comte: What do these differences in registration rates suggest?

Donatella Bradić: They indicate that smuggling networks are highly organized, and many migrants evade detection altogether. Those who are not intercepted by authorities are never registered.

In addition, the IOM conducts a separate qualitative survey. We interview migrants directly, asking about their journeys, whether they were intercepted or registered, and whether they received assistance from government facilities. This helps us estimate the proportion of migrants who are outside government oversight versus those who are formally recorded, giving us a clearer picture of migration flows in each country.

Emmanuel Comte: So, just to confirm, you cross-reference official data with your own surveys to estimate how many migrants go undetected?

Donatella Bradić: Exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: And then you're able to extrapolate a number. Could you please repeat—who was the audience for this survey? Who were the people you surveyed?

Donatella Bradić: Yes, of course. First of all, you can find all of this online. If you look up the Displacement Tracking Matrix for the Western Balkans, you'll find our published materials. These include detailed explanations of the methodology and data collection approach.

The individuals we surveyed—just to give an example—in 2024, we surveyed more than 13,000 people. We used a structured questionnaire to gather information on their reasons for leaving, the journey they undertook, any vulnerabilities they had, and the protection risks they encountered.

We also asked if they were subjected to violence or abuse along the route, which routes they took, how much they paid for smuggling services, and what types of violence they encountered at different borders. We inquired about their intended destinations as well. This provides us with a detailed picture of migration patterns, needs, services accessed along different stages of the journey, and how decisions are made.

I would say we have strong insights into this demographic. Notably, about 80% of those surveyed were young men, typically between the ages of 17 and 34. Most of them are single and travel alone or in small groups, with families remaining at home. If families are involved, they are mostly Syrian; other nationalities rarely travel as family units.

Emmanuel Comte: So, mostly young men traveling individually. Besides Syrians, which other nationalities dominate?

Donatella Bradić: Yes, apart from Syrians, the most dominant nationalities are Afghans, followed by Moroccans and Egyptians. In fact, among unaccompanied minors we encountered in the region, about 50% were from Egypt and 50% from Afghanistan. These children, either traveling alone or in small groups, primarily belong to those two nationalities.

Most of these individuals transit through Istanbul Airport.

The Digital Smuggler's toolkit

Emmanuel Comte: I see. That's really fascinating. One last question about the Balkan route—what about the smugglers? Are they local? Or is it more of a transnational, organized setup? They seem quite professional.

Donatella Bradić: That's a very interesting question. We've tried to better understand how these groups operate, and we've even commissioned an analytical investigative report through a journalism entity here in the Balkans.

The conclusion is that the smugglers include both nationals and foreigners. They typically operate in coordination. The organizers are not necessarily based in the countries where the migrants are; they may be in countries of origin or in key transit locations.

For example, in Türkiye, the facilitators on the ground are usually locals or foreign nationals who are embedded in the migrant community—often migrants themselves who were recruited en route, either to fund their own journey or to earn income while heading to the EU.

These facilitators might be taxi drivers or people offering accommodation and other services for money. However, they are not the main actors. The key organizers are usually outside the immediate region.

Another crucial aspect is that much of this facilitation is now digital. There's often no need for a physical smuggler. Migrants receive a "package" of information—GPS coordinates, contact numbers for facilitators, accommodation details—delivered via apps like Telegram or WhatsApp.

They pay for these packages in stages, and each package takes them to a specific point along the journey. Once they arrive, they purchase the next set of instructions. It's become incredibly sophisticated—almost like a travel agency. These packages may even include paid accommodation, allowing migrants to avoid contact with authorities or temporary reception centers.

This digital model makes interception very difficult. Proving these cases in court is also challenging because of the complexities of collecting, storing, and presenting digital evidence. As a result, many of these operations function with complete impunity.

Emmanuel Comte: Listening to you, I can't help but picture a large, informal travel agency in Istanbul that handles these operations.

Donatella Bradić: Absolutely—that's essentially what it has become. In cities like Istanbul, there are actual shops or booths where you can buy these packages.

Emmanuel Comte: I've heard similar things about Victoria Station in Athens. You can apparently find these services there too.

Donatella Bradić: Yes, exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: This has been truly fascinating. Thank you.

The Role and Evolution of IOM

Emmanuel Comte: So now, let's move on to the IOM's role in the region. How has the role of IOM changed during your time with the organization, and what is it concretely doing now?

Donatella Bradić: The transformation of IOM's operations has been quite significant, particularly in terms of our ability to support governments. You know, IOM officially became part of the United Nations in 2016. Since then, we've made substantial internal changes to align with UN standards and principles.

We have implemented a wide range of practices and policies to ensure this alignment. That was probably the major shift since the 1990s. Additionally, our ability to provide more sophisticated technical and policy support to governments has grown significantly.

Previously, IOM primarily served as a facilitator for immediate or emergency response. We still perform that role in many parts of the world, including during the 2015–2016 migration crisis and later in Bosnia when the migration route shifted in 2018.

But today, our primary role focuses on capacity development for sustainable migration governance. This includes providing policy frameworks, technical expertise, and the operational capabilities to support governments.

This approach ensures migration governance is aligned with EU principles—especially important in regions working toward EU accession—while also embedding international standards in all we do.

Emmanuel Comte: Let's unpack that a little. You've explained the current situation well, but I'd like to better understand the starting point. What was the role of IOM in the 1990s?

Donatella Bradić: I can speak from personal experience. I started working with IOM in 1992, when we were asked by the Jewish community to assist in the safe resettlement of Jews from Sarajevo to Canada. That was my first job with the organization.

At the time, the Serbian authorities permitted a convoy of Jewish Sarajevans to leave Sarajevo. They were temporarily hosted by the Jewish municipality in Belgrade, and the Canadian Jewish Congress organized their resettlement.

IOM was tasked with facilitating the process. That included conducting interviews, managing paperwork, arranging medical examinations and clearances, coordinating travel, and delivering cultural orientation sessions.

This was traditional IOM work. In fact, the organization was originally created in the 1950s to support emigration from Europe. And throughout the 1990s, we carried out similar resettlement operations across the former Yugoslavia—for destinations like the U.S., Australia, and Canada.

Over time, IOM began shifting toward a focus on migration governance. We started by helping countries map their migration landscapes—creating the first migration profiles. These profiles included data and analysis on immigration, emigration, returnees, readmission, and other migration flows.

We also supported the establishment of key migration institutions. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we helped set up the Service for Foreigners' Affairs, which now manages entry, stay, and exit processes in the country.

So IOM evolved from managing humanitarian responses and resettlement to becoming a key partner in shaping migration governance and supporting government institutions.

Emmanuel Comte: I see. And today, you mentioned capacity building and cooperation with the EU. Can you give a more concrete example—similar to the one about the Jewish association earlier? For instance, what work are you doing now with migrants along the Balkan route?

Donatella Bradić: Certainly. As of 2025, looking back on our current work, our portfolio focuses significantly on immigration and border management—commonly referred to as IBM.

We are helping to build the capacity of border police and migration authorities to effectively manage their borders. This includes everything from infrastructure development to policy and technical training, ensuring that border governance aligns with both national priorities and international standards.

We work with Frontex and various organizations that provide training, build capacity, and procure equipment in accordance with required standards.

We also work on the Integrated Border Management (IBM) strategy, which offers a comprehensive policy and legal framework to guide adaptation and alignment efforts.

In terms of counter-trafficking and counter-smuggling, our approach has shifted. Unlike in the 1990s or the early stages of the crisis, we no longer focus on direct assistance. Instead, we collaborate with government authorities and institutions to strengthen their own capacities to respond systematically and in alignment with domestic legislation and international obligations.

This means they must implement systems to identify victims of trafficking, provide appropriate accommodation, and ensure that victims are granted legal stay and can regularize their status. These individuals should be able to either integrate into the local system or participate in a return process. These responsibilities are clearly outlined in the legal framework, particularly in the laws concerning foreigners, asylum, and border control.

Emmanuel Comte: Do you help with returns?

Donatella Bradić: Yes, we assist with returns. Traditionally, we've supported Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs, which are well recognized internationally. We began implementing AVRR in 2016 after realizing that many individuals moving through the region became stranded and wished to return to their countries of origin when feasible.

Since 2017, working with the authorities, we've helped return over 3,000 people to more than 40 different countries. While this number is relatively small compared to the overall magnitude of the migration flows, it is still significant in impact.

Currently, we are working with EU member states and Frontex to establish a return mechanism that is effective. This includes both voluntary and non-voluntary returns, and requires strong cooperation with countries of origin. Unfortunately, countries in the Western Balkans have very few readmission agreements and limited active arrangements for verifying the nationality and identity of individuals.

One major challenge is that there is often no direct channel of communication with countries of origin. Even when biometric data is collected, authorities often rely on self-declared nationalities. For instance, many people may claim to be Afghan, but without verification, that information remains unconfirmed.

Moreover, since these countries are not part of Eurodac, they cannot access data from countries like Greece or Bulgaria that migrants may have previously transited. As a result, local authorities must re-establish identities from scratch, and cooperation with countries of origin remains minimal. Our focus now is on fostering that necessary cooperation.

Emmanuel Comte: We also spoke with an IOM representative in Greece, and the conversation focused primarily on returns. Am I correct in understanding that, since the IOM operates outside the EU here, your portfolio is broader than that of the IOM in Greece?

Donatella Bradić: I would say that's correct.

Emmanuel Comte: You collaborate with Frontex in regions where they are not directly active, in order to transfer expertise. Likewise, you work with other EU agencies to engage with local governments, provide guidance, and work with them to meet EU rules.

Donatella Bradić: Absolutely. The role of the IOM in non-EU contexts is fundamentally different from its role within the EU. For example, the Greek office is primarily funded through Greek government channels, often utilizing support from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) or other EU regional instruments. Here, however, the situation is a bit different. We work in partnership with the government, but we're not funded by them. Our funding primarily comes from the European Union—roughly 70%, I believe.

Emmanuel Comte: I see.

Donatella Bradić: In addition to EU funding, we also receive bilateral support. Denmark has been particularly generous and engaged in this region. There's also funding from Sweden, Italy, and to some extent, the United Kingdom. So, the funding landscape is more diversified compared to what you typically see in EU member states, where the majority comes directly from the EU.

Emmanuel Comte: So, you receive funding both from the EU and individual member states?

Donatella Bradić: Exactly.

Emmanuel Comte: It's interesting to see how well the IOM has adapted over the decades. It has managed to redefine its role as the context has evolved. It's almost like a private firm in that sense—very adaptable.

Donatella Bradić: Absolutely. I think the fact that we've traditionally operated on a project basis, unlike some other organizations, has made us more agile.

Emmanuel Comte: That makes sense.

Donatella Bradić: It has also made us more resilient to shocks. For example, when the U.S. started pulling back from multilateralism, our operational flexibility helped. Of course, that

shift had a global impact on IOM, but in regions where U.S. funding wasn't critical, we managed to stay quite agile.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, in the early days, IOM was heavily dependent on U.S. funding. My understanding is that even before the Trump presidency, there had been some reduction in that dependency.

Donatella Bradić: Actually, the dependency remained quite high—around 40% to 45%.

Emmanuel Comte: Ah, so still quite significant.

Donatella Bradić: Yes. That's largely because we've traditionally managed the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

Emmanuel Comte: In Latin America, I assume?

Donatella Bradić: Actually, also in Asia and Africa. That program accounted for a large portion of IOM's work for decades, but it has now been almost entirely shut down.

Emmanuel Comte: That's a major shift. Did that happen during Trump's first term, or is it more recent?

Donatella Bradić: It began almost immediately after Trump took office. All U.S.-funded programs were halted with just 24 hours' notice.

Emmanuel Comte: That was part of the broader foreign aid cuts?

Donatella Bradić: Exactly. It was a package deal that severely affected a number of international programs.

Emmanuel Comte: So it was a major shock to the organization, though perhaps not as much in your specific region?

Donatella Bradić: Correct. We were largely unaffected by the stop-work orders here. The impact was felt more acutely in operations across Asia and Latin America.

Regional Migration Dynamics and Reception Capacities

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. Let's now shift focus from institutional matters to the current challenges in the region, particularly the Western Balkans.

Donatella Bradić: Yes, we're currently dealing with an influx of irregular migrants—primarily young men.

Emmanuel Comte: Many people are traveling from North Africa, the Middle East, and perhaps even parts of South and Central Asia, often transiting through Istanbul Airport and following the Western Balkan route.

Beyond the fact that these individuals are irregular migrants and destination countries are trying to prevent these flows, is this movement also a problem for the region itself?

Donatella Bradić: First, it's important to note that since the end of 2023, there has been a significant decrease in migration flows. Figures recorded in 2024 and 2025 show nearly a 60% reduction.

Emmanuel Comte: Why has there been such a drop?

Donatella Bradić: Several factors contribute to this decline. The most significant is the police operation conducted in northern Serbia in 2023. Serbian authorities dismantled several smuggling networks, primarily involving Afghan and Syrian nationals, that were facilitating movement through Serbia toward Hungary.

Following these operations, the logistics supporting these movements were no longer in place. Migrants found it increasingly difficult to move through Serbia, especially as police began relocating people from the north to the south of the country, effectively making it harder to reach the Hungarian and Croatian borders.

As a result, both smugglers and migrants have started seeking alternative routes, perhaps shifting into Bosnia or even outside the Western Balkans entirely.

The second major factor is increased EU investment in border control and surveillance, including the deployment of Frontex. Joint patrols and enhanced enforcement have bolstered the region's capacity to control movement. Frontex now has operational agreements that allow deployment at non-EU borders, such as those between Bosnia and Serbia or Serbia and North Macedonia.

The third contributing factor is the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area. This has likely influenced route changes, as migrants now need to cross only one external border before entering the Schengen zone. There is speculation that migration flows may increasingly bypass the Balkans in favor of intra-EU routes through Bulgaria and Romania, though this remains to be confirmed.

Fourth, the Greek government introduced a law that allows over 30,000 individuals to regularize their status and obtain work permits. This has likely reduced onward movement from Greece by providing long-term residents with a legal and economic incentive to remain.

Lastly, Türkiye returned 180,000 individuals to their countries of origin in 2024. This large-scale return operation may have significantly reduced the number of migrants attempting to move onward through the Western Balkans.

When you look at all these factors together, it's clear they have contributed to the decline in movement along this route.

Emmanuel Comte: Listening to you, it seems the last factor—Türkiye's role—might be the most influential. It's as if Türkiye is no longer a passive recipient but is actively cooperating with European countries.

Donatella Bradić: Absolutely. Everything in Türkiye operates on a different scale. The number of migrants, asylum seekers, and returnees there is far larger than in any EU or Western Balkan country. Because of this scale, any systematic action taken by Türkiye has a tremendous impact on the broader region.

Emmanuel Comte: Going back to my original question—even if the flow has decreased, what has been the impact of migration on the region? Has it served purely as a transit zone, or has the region experienced deeper effects?

Donatella Bradić: That's a very pertinent question. I'll try to be concise and also share a recent observation that adds further context.

Traditionally, the Western Balkans have been a region of emigration. Many people from this region have moved to the EU and beyond over the years, and this trend continues today. The ongoing emigration creates acute labor shortages, which I'll touch on again shortly.

Regarding transit migration, large numbers of people have moved through these countries over the years. Under EU influence, the region has tried to develop governance structures to manage the flow. However, the perception of these countries as mere transit zones persists and affects policy and practice.

In 2023, approximately 120,000 people moved through the region; in 2024, the number was around 100,000. Yet only about 3% of them entered the asylum procedure. Very few sought international protection.

Why is that? Primarily because both the migrants and the authorities view these movements as temporary and transitory. Authorities do not process migrants with the intent of offering long-term solutions.

Even though asylum systems in the region have improved, they remain inadequate to meet the needs of those traveling through the Western Balkan route. In Serbia, for example, only one asylum case was approved last year.

This mindset—that the region is only a bridge and not a destination—limits both the response capacity and the possibilities for integration or protection for those on the move.

Some countries provide only subsidiary protection instead of full asylum protection. This happens quite frequently in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Montenegro is perhaps the only country that has made noticeable progress, likely due to its smaller size and population. Montenegro stands out in terms of its ability to process asylum cases more effectively than its peers in the Western Balkans. However, the asylum process overall remains underutilized and fails to offer the necessary safeguards for a robust asylum system.

Another point to consider is the reception facilities established in Serbia and Bosnia. These are primarily funded by the EU—they were set up, maintained, and are currently operated using EU funds. While this reflects a political agreement between the EU and these countries, it's not a sustainable model for managing migration.

The numbers of migrants they're dealing with are not overwhelming—just a few thousand individuals. These figures shouldn't significantly strain public services like education, healthcare, or social welfare. Still, the governments have managed to frame the situation in a way that compels the EU to provide financial support, essentially to manage migration at Europe's doorstep.

The real question is how the new EU migration pacts will affect this dynamic—particularly in terms of processing, returns, and screening procedures. This region is the gateway to Europe, and it remains to be seen how these developments will impact their capabilities. There's a real concern about return procedures and screening processes being outsourced or externalized.

There's anxiety in the region about what the EU might expect from them. We've already heard discussions about establishing return hubs in different countries—similar to the arrangement between Italy and Albania. The Western Balkans could face similar expectations.

This could reshape how these countries manage migration and influence political narratives and relationships between the Western Balkans and the EU. There's still a lot to be monitored in terms of how the EU proceeds with externalization, and whether that will undermine the efforts these states have made so far.

There's another dimension worth mentioning—labor migration. In recent years, there's been a significant increase in labor migrants entering the Western Balkans. Last year alone, 100,000 work permits were issued in the region, with Serbia accounting for 52,000 of them.

The number of foreigners coming in legally for work now far exceeds those arriving through irregular migration. Many of these workers are from countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Türkiye. Turkish nationals, in particular, often arrive through corporate arrangements.

EU Accession and Institutional Reform

Emmanuel Comte: Very interesting. My final question is: What are the prospects for EU accession in the region? How will it transform current practices, and what is your role in this process?

Donatella Bradić: We have worked very hard to ensure that the alignment process with Chapters 23 and 24 proceeds effectively. Our programmatic and strategic approach is designed to ensure that all program objectives align closely with those of the EU action plans—such as the Schengen Action Plan and the Integrated Border Management (IBM) Action Plan.

We have systematically followed the EU accession agenda, providing thematic and targeted support to accompany this process through both our programming and technical assistance. In particular, in Montenegro, we are now implementing the master plan developed by Frontex. This involves operationalizing the Eurodac system and setting up a National Coordination Centre, which is a key requirement under Chapter 24 for EU accession.

If executed successfully by the end of 2026, this will likely allow Montenegro to close Chapter 24. We are deeply engaged and heavily invested in these very complex and demanding processes, which require structural reforms and significant changes at the institutional level.

This effort is not just part of our operational approach—it's embedded in our mandate. In terms of prospects, there are two clear frontrunners in this process: Albania and Montenegro. Both countries are nearing completion of the benchmarking exercises. We've observed considerable transformation in how their administrations engage with the process—demonstrating motivation, transparency, and systematic effort. These are clear signs of institutional change.

That said, we have not observed the same level of progress in other countries of the region.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Comte: Understood. Thank you very much, Mrs. Bradić, for sharing your insights into the region. We've learned a lot about the management of migration flows, the transitional dynamics at play, and developments across various sectors. Thank you again for contributing to this interview.

Donatella Bradić: You're welcome. I hope I've answered your questions and met your expectations. If you would like further information, links, or access to specific documents, please feel free to reach out. I'll be happy to assist.