THE ROLE OF FRONTEX IN SECURITY RISKS MITIGATION IN THE BALKANS

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Abstract. *There are many security chalanges in the Balkans and Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) is having a substancial role in managing the external borders of the European Union. This article provides an overview upon security risks based on Frontex annual report (2023). The security challenges in the Balkans in matters of border control, organised crime, terrorism threats and cross-border smuggling activities are threats to be analysed for a better understanding and a tight evaluation of Frontex operations and activities, enhancing intelligence and sharing coopeartion. The high impact of migration on security determines suplementary measures in the Balkans for improving border surveillance technology, enhancing intelligence and sharing cooperation.*

1. Introduction

The Western Balkans (WB) have come into the international spotlight as an arena for big power competition. In their foreign policy orientation, the region's six countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, as they all share Euro-Atlantic affiliations, although the degree of affiliation varies. Moreover, internally, functional and structural weaknesses, Albania's legacy of an isolationist communist dictatorship or the consequence of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the other countries might be open doors for hostile foreign actors to project their influence in this region.

The Western Balkans are facing several complex challenges as they strive for political stability, economic growth, and integration into European and international structures. Nowadays they are facing some of the biggest challenges. One of the challenges is political instability, because of the fragile institutions and ethnic tensions. Many countries in the region suffer from weak governance, corruption, and lack of institutional transparency (Bak, 2019). Political instability is often fueled by fragmented political systems, ineffective rule of law, and entrenched political elites. Another challenge would be the ethnic tensions namely the historical ethnic conflicts, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, that continue to pose significant challenges to political reconciliation and long-term stability (Resulani, 2023: 2-9).

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The region struggles with high unemployment rates, especially among youth. In addition, wages are generally low, which pushes many skilled workers to seek opportunities abroad, causing a "brain drain". Many countries are heavily reliant on foreign direct investment (FDI) for economic development, but this is often limited due to political uncertainty and corruption. Economic growth is uneven and vulnerable to global economic shifts. Poor infrastructure, from transportation to digital networks, hampers economic growth. Connectivity within the region and with the EU remains suboptimal, making it harder to attract investment and integrate into broader European markets. Many countries in the Western Balkans are experiencing aging populations due to low birth rates and high emigration. This demographic shift puts pressure on social services and pension systems, and diminishes the labor force. The region continues to suffer from high emigration rates, particularly among young, educated individuals. This "brain drain" hampers long-term economic development and reduces the potential for innovation and entrepreneurship (Icoski, 2022).

Corruption remains a significant barrier to development. It permeates many aspects of public life, from politics to business. Anti-corruption measures are often weakly implemented, leading to a lack of trust in public institutions. Also, the region is a hub for organized crime, particularly in drug trafficking, human trafficking, and money laundering. These networks often have ties to political figures, making it harder to combat them effectively. Judicial independence is often compromised, with courts susceptible to political influence. Legal systems are slow, inefficient, and often unable to protect citizens' rights or enforce contracts fairly. Strengthening the rule of law is critical for both economic development and democratic governance (European Commission, 2024).

The EU accession process has been slow for most Western Balkan countries. Political reforms, rule of law improvements, and addressing corruption are major conditions for EU membership. Countries like Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia are candidates but face lengthy negotiations. Both within the Western Balkans and in the EU, there is a sense of enlargement fatigue. Citizens of these countries may feel disillusioned by the slow pace of reforms and perceived lack of progress in joining the EU, while some EU members are reluctant to expand further. In the same time, the Western Balkans are subject to geopolitical competition between the EU, the US, Russia, China, and Turkey. Russia, for instance, has sought to increase its influence in Serbia and Republika Srpska. China is expanding its economic footprint, especially through infrastructure projects, which could complicate EU integration efforts (European Commission, 2022a).

2. Classic and Hybrid Threats in the Balkans

There are many security concerns. The risk of renewed conflict or instability in certain areas, such as between Kosovo and Serbia, or internal instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, remains a persistent concern. The presence of external actors can also exacerbate these tensions. Addressing these challenges will require coordinated efforts from the Western Balkan countries themselves, as well as support from the international community, particularly the EU, to foster long-term stability and development. According to the European Commission's Enlargement Package and the Progress Report, adopted on 8 November 2023 the rule of law and fundamental reforms remain one of the biggest challenges for the WB (European Comission, 2023a: 8-11).

Participants at the international conference organised by the New Strategy Centre in 2022 in Timisoara found that "the Balkan region is plagued by problems such as a lack

of functioning democratic systems, economic weaknesses, energy dependencies, unresolved territorial disputes, ethnic tension, and a lack of trust in state institutions and international organizations". Countering classic and hybrid threats in the Balkans requires a multifaceted strategy, given the region's complex political, social, and economic landscape. These threats come from both military challenges and non-traditional forms of warfare, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, economic coercion, and political manipulation both by external and internal actors (New Strategy Center, 2022). There are different risks in the region which are being used and manipulated by third parties with interests in the region (Zamfir, 2020). Also, countering classic and hybrid threats in the Balkans requires a comprehensive, coordinated approach that involves strengthening regional security, bolstering governance, improving resilience to cyber and disinformation campaigns, and building strong alliances with international partners. The region must focus on long-term solutions that address underlying vulnerabilities, such as – we already mentioned above, weak institutions, ethnic divisions, and economic dependence, to create a more stable and secure environment (New Strategy Center, 2022).

If, taking into account the classic threats, they refer to traditional forms of conflict and instability that have influenced the Balkans for centuries. These threats usually stem from longstanding ethnic tensions, political disputes, and the risk of state-on-state or internal armed conflicts. From the classical point of view, we have here ethnic conflicts and tensions, border disputes, armed forces and military increasing budgets, terrorism and extremism, etc. The legacy of the Yugoslav Wars continues to cast more than a shadow over the region, especially in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia. Ethnic divisions remain a source of friction, with unresolved issues concerning the status of minority populations and disputed territories, like Kosovo's independence, posing a risk of escalation. Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided between the two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (dominated by Bosniaks and Croats) and Republika Srpska (Serb-dominated), with political leaders occasionally threatening secession or a return to hostilities.

Border disputes between countries in the Balkans remain a source of potential conflict and still Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, and border tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, are particularly volatile issues. Mentioning Montenegro and Serbia, while officially at peace, occasionally they experience diplomatic disputes over the role of ethnic Serbs in Montenegro and cultural heritage matters.

While direct military conflict in the region is currently unlikely, the possibility remains due to rising nationalism, historical grievances, and the build-up of military forces in some countries. Some Western Balkan states have been increasing military budgets and upgrading their arsenals, which, if unchecked, could heighten tensions and lead to miscalculations. Though less prevalent than in other regions, Islamist extremism and radicalization remain a concern, particularly among marginalized or disenfranchised populations. Returnees from conflict zones such as Syria or Iraq, or the presence of extremist ideologies, pose a security challenge for governments in the region.

Hybrid threats combine conventional and unconventional tactics, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and political manipulation. These threats exploit vulnerabilities within states to undermine stability, societal cohesion, and governance. External actors, mainly Russia, engage in disinformation campaigns designed to destabilize the region, promote anti-Western sentiments, and exacerbate ethnic and political divisions. Russian media outlets, troll farms, and social

media are often used to spread misinformation, particularly targeting Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where pro-Russian sentiment is stronger (Juola, Smith, 2020). Taking into account the disinformation campaigns, they often aim to erode trust in EU and NATO institutions, presenting these organizations as hostile or indifferent to the region's unique issues. By exploiting Euroskepticism and doubts about NATO, these actors can slow down the Western integration of the Balkans (European Commission, 2018). Meanwhile cyberattacks are becoming a common tool for disrupting governance and security in the Balkans. State-backed actors from Russia, China, Turkey or other interested powers could target critical infrastructure like energy grids, banking systems, and telecommunications, as well as government institutions (Memišević, 2024).

Hybrid actors often seek to interfere in electoral processes by hacking political parties, leaking sensitive information, or using bots and trolls to manipulate public opinion. These tactics aim to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. We can mention here some of the concerns: economic coercion, political manipulation, organized crime, exploiting ethnic divides. One of the main coercions is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative. While these investments boost economic development, they also create dependencies. Countries like Montenegro have taken on unsustainable debt to finance these projects, giving China leverage over key national assets. Russia uses its dominance in the energy sector to exert influence over countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Energy dependency on Russian gas is a form of economic leverage, allowing Moscow to exert political influence. External actors often support nationalist political movements in the Balkans to destabilize regional cooperation and integration with Western institutions. Russia, for instance, has been accused of supporting nationalist leaders in Serbia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska to maintain influence over their foreign policy direction. Hybrid threats include the manipulation of political systems through corruption. Oligarchs and criminal networks, often with ties to foreign actors, can undermine governance and democratic processes by funding political campaigns or influencing key officials ((Memišević, 2024)).

The Balkans is a hub for organized crime, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, and money laundering. These criminal networks are often linked to political figures, creating a hybrid threat where criminal activities and political corruption converge to destabilize governance. Weak law enforcement and border control make the region a transit route for illicit goods, including arms and drugs, which can fund terrorism and insurgent activities. Hybrid warfare tactics often exploit ethnic divisions by spreading divisive narratives through local media or social platforms. For instance, Russian-backed propaganda in Bosnia and Herzegovina often supports Republika Srpska's secessionist rhetoric, while nationalist parties in Serbia may use historical grievances to push anti-Albanian or anti-Croat sentiment (European Commission, 2024).

Hybrid threats often involve external actors stirring up ethnic tensions, especially in multi-ethnic states like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. These efforts aim to weaken state cohesion and prevent the region from moving toward greater stability. Russia views the Balkans as part of its traditional sphere of influence and seeks to block or slow down the region's integration into NATO and the EU. It uses a mix of political, economic, and informational tactics to maintain influence, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska. Russia's influence operations often involve spreading disinformation, supporting nationalist politicians, and leveraging energy dependency. China's involvement in the Balkans, primarily through economic investments, has grown

significantly. While these investments boost infrastructure, they also create economic dependencies that China can exploit for geopolitical purposes. China's strategic goal is to gain influence over key transport routes and political alignments in the region. Turkey has cultural and religious ties with parts of the Balkans, especially among Muslim populations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania. It exerts influence through religious diplomacy, investments, and cultural exchanges. Turkey's interest in the region can sometimes conflict with EU and NATO objectives, especially as Ankara's relationship with the West becomes more complicated (Keli, 2023).

3. Security Challenges of the South East Europe

The threats of secession in Bosnia and Herzegovina, fueled by Russia's weaponization of energetic exports and disinformation campaigns. Such issues are to be solved, as the French insight advises, through EU unity: facilitating the enlargement process by establishing strong dialogues with capitals in Western Balkans and unlocking Bulgaria's veto.

One of the chalange is the geopolitical instability but also in the same time the influence of Russia, NATO, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia. From the historical point of view, Russia has had strong political and economic connections with many countries in the region, mainly Serbia and Republika Srpska. Many disinformation campaigns leaded to ethnic tensions, nationalism, so there is a powerful anti-Western attitude in the region (Szakács, Bognár, 2021). Furthermore, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, are very concerned about security isues and have enforced military cooperation with NATO. These countries have enhanced military deployments in response to Russia's aggression and othre countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Albania are seeking faster EU accession for a better security and stability. Even if NATO left EU its enlargement in the region is seen as a deterrent to Russian expansionism (Marten, 2020).

In Serbia, as for combating irregular migration, the 2022-2027 strategy for integrated border management and the 2022-2024 action plan, adopted in August 2022, put special emphasis on efficient registration of irregular migrants and on their processing, but also on coordination among institutions within the migration management system and on return procedures to either the country of origin or the country of previous entry" (European Commission, 2023b). Also, the Brdo Declaration mentioned that "The EU and the Western Balkans share a number of security challenges that demand coordinated action. We agree to strengthen our cooperation on core security issues, including at operational level, building on the work done under the Sofia Priority Agenda. Our partners pledge to demonstrate their commitment to our shared security and to continue to develop effective instruments for intra-Western Balkans cooperation. They have proven their commitment to CSDP, by contributing to EU missions and operations, and we will work together to further develop their capabilities and capacities, notably through the European Peace Facility. The EU will enhance its engagement also in fields such as space and military mobility to ease access of civil-military assistance to the region in the event of pandemics and natural disasters" (European Commission, 2021a).

It is compulsory for the European Union to increase scrutiny on border force activities in Balkan countries, especially given concerns about human rights violations, illegal pushbacks, and the handling of migrants and asylum seekers. The Western Balkans serve as a key transit route for migrants attempting to reach the EU, and the actions of border forces in the region have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. There are some key reasons why increased EU oversight is necessary such as allegations of

human rights violations, strengthening accountability and transparency, migration pressure and geopolitical context, ensuring compliance with international and EU laws, enhancing the role of Frontex, preventing the spread of organized crime, etc. The WB are a major corridor for migrants heading to Europe, particularly through the so-called Balkan Route. This creates significant pressure on national border forces, and without proper oversight, they may resort to unlawful or inhumane practices to cope with the influx (European Commission, 2022b).

The Balkan region is also of geopolitical subject for the EU, Russia, Turkey, and other actors strategies. For this reason, some countries in the region may prioritize security over humanitarian concerns, which can lead to friction between EU norms and local practices. Enhanced scrutiny can help ensure that local border policies align with EU standards. The EU stands for obligations in order to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are treated in accordance with international law. The practice of pushing back migrants without processing their asylum claims is illegal under EU and international law. However, reports suggest that such pushbacks occur regularly in several Balkan countries. The EU should impose that border forces respect these legal obligations, even amid migration crises. Increased scrutiny on border force activities would help ensure compliance with the Geneva Convention on refugees, EU asylum directives, and human rights norms (European Commission, 2022b).

Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, plays a key role in supporting member states and neighboring countries in border management. However, Frontex itself has been criticized for not adequately addressing human rights concerns in the regions where it operates. By increasing its role in the Balkans, Frontex could both support local forces and serve as a watchdog for human rights, ensuring better alignment with EU laws. The EU should also focus on training local border forces to manage migration in a way that respects human dignity and legal norms. Frontex can provide technical assistance and training to ensure that local forces are better equipped to handle migration pressures without resorting to abusive practices (European Commission, 2022c).

The Balkans are a hotspot for organized crime, particularly human smuggling and trafficking networks. While border forces play a key role in tackling these crimes, without proper oversight, they may also become complicit in these illicit activities. Increased EU scrutiny would help identify cases of corruption or complicity within border forces and ensure that they are acting in accordance with the law. Increasing EU scrutiny on border force activities in the Balkans is essential to ensure that migrant and asylum seeker rights are respected and protected. By holding border forces accountable, ensuring compliance with international law, and promoting transparency, the EU can help improve border management while upholding its fundamental values. This approach requires a balance between security concerns and human rights, ensuring that vulnerable populations are treated with dignity and fairness (European Commission, 2022c).

The Western Balkans Border Security Initiative (WBBSi) is a collaborative framework aimed at enhancing border security, migration management, and cooperation between the Western Balkans and the European Union, particularly through the involvement of Frontex and other EU institutions. The initiative focuses on strengthening border management capacities, fostering regional cooperation, and ensuring the alignment of Western Balkan countries with EU standards and practices (Regional Cooperation Council, IISG). Key elements of WBBSi typically include (Kayser et all, 2019):

1. Capacity Building: Enhancing the technical and operational capabilities of border agencies in the Western Balkans to handle migration, trafficking, and security challenges more effectively.

2. Information Sharing: Facilitating the exchange of data, intelligence, and risk assessments between Western Balkan countries and the EU to address cross-border threats and ensure integrated border management.

3. Joint Operations: Organizing joint border operations and patrols in collaboration with Frontex and regional partners to manage migration flows and respond to emerging security risks in the region.

4. Training and Technical Assistance: Providing specialized training programs for border personnel and law enforcement agencies, alongside technical assistance to improve infrastructure and surveillance systems at border crossings.

5. The WBBSI initiative is an important part of the EU's broader efforts to integrate the Western Balkans into its security architecture and stabilize the region through strong, secure borders and regional cooperation.

4. Frontex and the Balkans

The Western Balkan region is Frontex's closest strategic partner outside the EU, making the collaboration between the European Border and Coast Guard and its Western Balkan counterparts of critical importance. Cooperation with all six partners, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, is supported by a comprehensive framework, including working arrangements, Frontex liaison officers, and collaboration through the Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network. In June 2019 and November 2021, the Heads of Border Management authorities from the Western Balkans took part in high-level meetings with the Frontex Management Board alongside Western Balkan partners (Medecins Sans Frontiers, 2023).

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has expanded its presence in the Balkans in recent years mainly due to increased migration flows and the need for enhancing border security in the region. Mentioning that the Agency is growing very fast we have to underline the fact that Frontex's operations in the Balkans are part of the EU's strategy to strengthen external borders and at the outmost importance the missions we planned to manage migration more effectively, particularly given the challenges posed by the Balkan migration route. Some of the key aspects of the Frontex missions in the Balkans are to enhance border control activities and to monitor the area, but furthermore to participte in joint operations with Non-EU countries. The primary mission of Frontex in the Balkans is to assist local authorities with border control and monitoring, but we have to add to these also preventing irregular migration, smuggling, and human trafficking. Frontex initiated the missions in order to ensure that the borders are secure and that asylum procedures are properly applied, according to fundamental rights legislation. Frontex officers, equipment, and technologies such as surveillance drones, thermal cameras, mobile units, are deployed along the most problematic borders in the region and the Agency is focused on countries along the "Western Balkan migration route" (North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina). Also, European Agency has signed status agreements with several non-EU Balkan countries, allowing its officers to operate on their territory and these agreements enable the agency to provide direct support and carry out joint operations in cooperation with local border police (Albania-2019, Montenegro and Serbia- 2020) (Frontex, 2021a).

Frontex's cooperation with Western Balkan partners has a strategic significance, as the region serves as a critical non-EU partner in border management. The partnership is supported by a comprehensive framework that includes working arrangements. These formal agreements establish the foundation for operational cooperation between Frontex and the respective Western Balkan countries, allowing for joint efforts in border security, migration management, and combating cross-border crime. Frontex has deployed liaison officers to the region to facilitate communication, coordination, and operational support, ensuring closer collaboration and real-time exchange of information. Also, the network of Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network (WB-RAN) enables the sharing of intelligence and risk analysis related to migration patterns and security threats, helping both Frontex and the Western Balkan partners enhance their border management capabilities (Frontex, 2016).

Regular high-level meetings between Frontex and the Western Balkan countries further solidify this cooperation. For instance, in June 2019 and November 2021, the Heads of Border Management authorities from the region attended strategic discussions with the Frontex Management Board, underscoring the importance of this partnership in addressing common border security challenges. The key points of the subject include important time related pillars (Frontex, 2021b):

- 2009 JO Coordination Points Air October Signature of the EU-Albania Status Agreement JO Focal Points Air April Deployment of the first Frontex Liaison Officer to the Western Balkans Signature of the Working Arrangements between Frontex and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia;

- 2016 January Launch of the IPA II Project Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey May Signature of the Working Arrangement between Frontex and Kosovo;

- 2017 JO Focal Points Air April Deployment of the first Frontex Liaison Officer to the Western Balkans;

- 2018 JO Coordination Points Air October Signature of the EU-Albania Status Agreement;

- 2019 JO Coordination Points Air May Launch of the land joint operation in Albania June 1st high-level meeting between Frontex Management Board and Western Balkan partners July Launch of Phase II of the IPA II Project Regional Support to Protection Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey November Signature of the EU-Serbia Status Agreement;

- 2020 JO Coordination Points Air July Launch of the land joint operation in Montenegro October Launch of the maritime joint;

- 2021 JO Coordination Points Air, Land and Sea January Deployment of the second Frontex Liaison Officer to the Western Balkans March Renewed Working Arrangement with Albania signed March Launch of the maritime joint operation in Albania.

Since the migrant crisis hit Bosnia in 2017, some 145,000 refugees and migrants have entered the country on their way westwards, with the biggest number, almost 32,000, registered in 2023. But only 1,791 border police officers are currently employed in securing Bosnia's borders, 635 fewer than the number required under a 2005 border safety assessment. Since 2019, when Frontex launched its first operation in a non-EU country, around 500 officers have been deployed in the Balkan region (Kurtic, 2024). Also, there are joint operations on the EU's external borders with Albania, North

Macedonia and Serbia, as well as via the previous agreement with Montenegro, which came into force in July 2020 (PubAffaires EU, 2020).

Frontex's involvement in the Balkans has also encountered criticism. In November 2022, plans to conduct mass surveillance on Europe's borders were frozen after a cross-border investigation published by BIRN and a critical review of the programme by EDPS, the EU's data protection watchdog. The agency was forced to admit irregularities and commit to rewriting the programme in compliance with EU data protection laws. Frontex's director, Fabrice Leggeri, resigned over a human rights scandal sparked by a joint investigation published in April 2022 by Lighthouse Reports, *Der Spiegel*, SRF Rundschau, *Republik* and *Le Monde*. The investigation revealed the involvement of Frontex in illegal pushbacks of asylum-seekers from Greece to Turkey between March 2020 and September 2021. The involvement was later confirmed by EU's anti-corruption watchdog OLAF (Christides, Ludke, 2022).

Frontex currently has 2,500 EU border guard officers and other staff taking part in its joint operations at Europe's borders. During 2023, a new Frontex joint operations were launched in North Macedonia and it launched several pilot projects in Southeastern Europe. Therefore, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is expanding its operational activities outside of the European Union with the launch of a new operation in Serbia. Serbia is the third country in the Western Balkans to host a fully-fledged Frontex operation with 44 standing corps officers from 14 countries helping to detect criminal activities such as people smuggling, trafficking in human beings, document fraud and smuggling of stolen vehicles, illegal drugs, weapons and excise goods, as well as potential terrorist threats. In the coming months, the number of officers is expected to rise to up to 87 officers upon Serbia's request. Also, Frontex already has nearly 150 standing corps officers and staff taking part in operations in Albania and Montenegro, along with patrol cars, helicopters and other equipment. The operation was conducted along Serbia's border with Bulgaria, an area that has experienced a significant increase in illegal border crossings in recent years. The coordination of the operation is managed from Frontex headquarters in Warsaw, Poland, while a Local Coordination Centre will be set up at the Border Crossing Point Gradina to facilitate on-the-ground efforts (Frontex, 2021c).

The standing corps officers deployed in Serbia will also participate in activities under European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), a security initiative led by EU Member States. EMPACT focuses on identifying, prioritizing, and addressing the threats posed by organized and serious international crime, enhancing collaboration across borders to ensure more effective law enforcement and crime prevention. The start of the "Joint Operation Serbia - Land 2021" is another important step in the implementation of the Status Agreement between the European Union and Serbia, which entered into force in May (Europol, 2022).

Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency launched its first fully-fledged joint operation outside the European Union, deploying 50 officers with 16 patrol cars and one thermo-vision van from 12 EU Member States to support Albania in border control and tackling cross-border crime. Later on, the European Agency suspended its operations on the Hungarian side of the border with Serbia following a court ruling that Hungary had breached EU law by committing illegal pushbacks of migrants arriving from Serbia. In December 2022, Frontex moved its operations to the Serbian side of the border as part of the EU's project to externalize migration management to neighbouring third countries (Frontex, 2019).

According to the most recent data published by the European Union's Agency for Border Control, the Central Mediterranean and Balkan Routes are the two most active routes taken by migrants and refugees to enter the European Union. The data overview, including all the irregular border crossings[1] at the EU's external borders detected in 2023, says the Western Balkan route remains the second-most used route, with 99,068 irregular crossings detected (Frontex, 2024). However, that number was a 31% decrease compared to the number in 2022, over a third of all detections. On the EU's total external border, Frontex detected some 380,000 irregular crossings – a significant jump compared to 2022, mainly due to a rise in arrivals via the Mediterranean region. "This marks the highest level since 2016 and constitutes a 17% increase from the figures in 2022, indicating a consistent upward trend over the past three years," the agency's press release said (Frontex, 2024). The Central Mediterranean was the most active migratory route into the EU, accounting for 41% of irregular crossings, Syrians accounted for more than 100,000 irregular crossings last year, making them the largest group among all nationalities. They were followed by individuals from Guinea and Afghanistan. These three nationalities collectively represent a significant portion of irregular migration patterns. In response, Frontex is enhancing its cooperation with non-EU countries through targeted technical assistance projects, leveraging various funding instruments provided by the European Commission.

The agency strives to ensure that its technical assistance action complement EU's overall external relations policies. While each project focuses on a different priority region and topics, all project activities address specific needs of the beneficiary countries and support them in building their capacities in the field of border security and management. The technical assistance projects contribute to laying the foundation for strategic cooperation or build up on already established functional relationships between Frontex and the national authorities of relevant countries. Currently, three EU-funded projects and one grant agreement are being implemented with an overall funding of 31 million euros (Frontex, 2023a).

There were different initiatives for EU regional support for combating migration one of these start in January 2022 and has as beneficiaries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia. With a financing of 5,5 million euros from the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), Frontex along with the European Union Agency for Asylum, the International Organisation for Migration, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will implement the European Commission-funded regional programme *EU Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management Systems in the Western Balkans – Phase III*[2], until 2025. The goals of the regional programme are: improved standardised and regionally operable statistics and mechanisms for identification, registration, and referral of mixed migration movements; improved implementation of international protection measures, including for vulnerable persons; Improved management of returns and alternatives to detention; improved contingency planning and crisis response capacities according to EU

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[1] An interesting aspect of the report is the change in the language used by Frontex. After years of advocacy by migrants' rights groups, the report ditched the term "illegal crossings" and has instead opted for the adjective "irregular". The previous term contrasted with the right to cross the borders to seek asylum, as recognised in the Geneva Convention signed in 1951.
[2] Frontex participates in implementation of the regional programme since its inception in 2016. Phase I of the programme lasted from 2016 to 2019, and Phase II from 2019 to 2021.

best practices, including at regional level. The regional programme will consist of four projects implemented by each of the above-mentioned organisations: improved mechanisms for identification and registration of mixed migration movements; improved management of returns; improved contingency planning and crisis response capacities (European Commission, 2021b).

The *EU Regional Support to strengthen border security capacities in the Western Balkans*, focuses on enhancing the overall border management and security framework in the region. This initiative aims to address the growing challenges related to irregular migration, cross-border crime, and security threats while promoting regional cooperation and alignment with EU standards. The beneficiaries are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and the time-frame is 2023 – 2026. The EU Grant is 7 million EUR funded by the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) and administered by Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. The project aims to enhance border security in the Western Balkans in accordance with EU and international standards. It will be implemented in a way that ensures the alignment and integration of each beneficiary into EU tools, practices, and mechanisms related to border management. Throughout all phases, this action will complement and support the EU's overall policy engagement with the IPA III beneficiaries in the Western Balkans. The project is focusing its work in three directions: support the Western Balkan (WB) partners to align their border management policies with standards and practices of the European Integrated Border Management (IBM); support the implementation of Status Agreements by increasing operational capacities through provision of training and equipment for border checks, surveillance, and detection of falsified travel documents; support the Western Balkan beneficiaries in the establishment of National Coordination Centres and provide state-of-the-art IT infrastructure for swift and secure information exchange (Frontex, 2023b).

EU4BorderSecurity is an another initiative aimed at enhancing border security and management within the European Union and its neighboring regions, particularly in the Western Balkans. This program is designed to improve the capabilities of border authorities, strengthen cooperation between countries, and ensure alignment with EU standards and practices. The beneficiary countries are Southern Neighbourhood countries, the time-frame is 2018 – 2025 and the EU Grant (6,5 million euros) is given by the European Neighbourhood Instrument. The overall aim of the project is to contribute to enhancing border security in the Southern Neighbourhood, by fostering bilateral and regional cooperation, through awareness/capacity building activities and technical exchanges in the Integrated Border Management domain. Project goals are: to enhance border security in the Southern Mediterranean region, particularly North Africa and the Levant, by fostering bilateral and regional cooperation; to familiarize the participating countries with the mandate and work of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency; to build trust, understanding, structured partnerships, and exchange of experiences and practices in the Integrated Border Management domain; to enhance the capacity of the participating countries to conduct risk analysis, situation monitoring, as well as tactical border and coast guard operations, thus contributing to the fight against security threats, particularly organised crime and terrorism in the region; health and safety at the borders (Frontex, 2021d).

As the number of officers continues to grow rapidly, the agency will take measures to strengthen command in the field and will decentralize certain activities to improve coordination and communication with host country authorities. The creation of

the first European uniformed service represents a significant shift in how the agency oversees and executes its operational response activities. The rising number of EU border guard deployments, along with an increase in the agency's own personnel, reqires a strong and efficient management structure to ensure that all operations are executed effectively (Frontex, 2023c). While starting with 2024, the new command structure will be rolled out across all Frontex operations and national authorities will continue to hold responsibility for tactical command in their respective operational areas.

5. Conclusions

Frontex plays a pivotal role in addressing security risks in the Balkans through a multifaceted approach that encompasses border management, operational support, and regional cooperation. Its contributions underlines the importance of Frontex Agency's actions in the area. Enhanced Border Security has a huge importance by deploying border guards and advanced surveillance technologies, Frontex strengthens border control, reducing irregular migration and transnational crime, including human trafficking and drug smuggling.

The Agency's comprehensive risk analysis capabilities enable it to identify and address emerging security threats effectively. This proactive approach helps member states allocate resources and strategize their responses. Frontex's training programs and operational support enhance the capabilities of national authorities in the Balkans and, by fostering a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing, the agency helps build stronger, more resilient border management systems.

The coordination of joint operations across multiple countries exemplifies Frontex's commitment to a collective response to security challenges. This collaborative framework enhances the effectiveness of operations and strengthens regional ties. By promoting the exchange of information among member states, Frontex enhances situational awareness and enables timely responses to security threats. This cooperation is essential in addressing the complex nature of security risks in the region. Frontex's ability to deploy rapid response teams during crises and engage with local communities fosters trust and cooperation. This grassroots approach addresses the underlying factors contributing to insecurity, leading to more sustainable solutions.

Frontex significantly contributes to the mitigation of security risks in the Balkans by reinforcing border security, enhancing national capabilities, promoting regional cooperation, and fostering trust within communities. Its comprehensive strategies are at the outmoust importance for ensuring stability and addressing the complex challenges faced by the region. As security dynamics continue to evolve, Frontex's role will remain under preasure in adapting to new threats and ensuring a coordinated response among Member States.

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency is a key player in mitigating security risks in the Balkans by strengthening border security, combating cross-border crime, and improving migration management. Its importance for supporting the local authorities through joint operations and capacity-building initiatives is relevant, the Agency has helped stabilize the region and align its border control practices with EU standards. However, tehre are challenges to take into account especially in ensuring that these efforts do not come at the cost of human rights.

As geopolitical tensions and migration pressures persist in the region, Frontex is going to be present in the Balkans and its presence will be essential for maintaining security and promoting regional integration into European security frameworks.

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