

Inside the System, Outside the Club

Serbia at the Edges of Europe's Migration Regime

Povzetek

Znotraj sistema, zunaj kluba: Srbija na robovih evropskega migracijskega režima

Članek kritično preučuje vključevanje Srbije v migracijski režim Evropske unije med letoma 2015 in 2025. Raziskuje prehod Srbije iz obrobne tranzitne cone v strateško lokacijo za zadrževanje, izvajanje deportacij in okrepljeno varovanje meja. Srbija v tem procesu ni bila pasivna partnerica, temveč je proaktivno prestrukturirala svoj pravni, institucionalni in operativni okvir, da bi se uskladila s prednostnimi nalogami EU na področju nadzora migracij. Raziskava nadzora migracij razkriva večplastne in postopne procese, skozi katere je prišlo do tega usklajevanja, vključno s pravno uskladitvijo z zakonodajo EU, dvostranskimi in tristranskimi policijskimi sporazumi, razporeditvijo osebja agencije Frontex ter uvedbo digitalne infrastrukture za izvajanje vračanj in biometričnih sistemov nadzora. Ti ukrepi so pogosto predstavljeni pod pretvezo tehnične pomoči, regionalnega sodelovanja ali humanitarne podpore. Hkrati so politične in finančne naložbe EU spremenile geografsko lego in izvršilne zmožnosti Srbije v blago, s čimer so jim dale operativno legitimnost, vendar pa so državi odrekale pravice, zaščito in odločevalno moč, ki jih sicer imajo države članice pri oblikovanju skupnih politik. Ta asimetrična ureditev Srbije postavlja v vlogo izvajalke in hkrati proizvod politike evropske eksternalizacije meja. Članek v zaključku pojasni, da je izkušnja Srbije simbolična za širši evropski trend: nadzora migracij, ki se izvaja prek »podizvajalcev«, pri čemer se pravna varovala krnijo, pravice pa se dodeljujejo selektivno. To spreminja samo geografijo evropskega upravljanja.

Ključne besede: evropski mejni in migracijski režim, Srbija, eksternalizacija, Zahodni Balkan, suverenost

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Abstract

This text critically examines Serbia's integration into the European Union's migration regime between 2015 and 2025. It explores Serbia's transition from a peripheral transit zone to a strategic location for containment, deportation, and enhanced border securitisation. Rather than being a passive partner, Serbia has proactively restructured its legal, institutional, and operational landscape to align with the EU's priorities for controlling migration. The study explores the layered and incremental processes through which this alignment has occurred, including legal harmonisation with the EU *acquis*, bilateral and trilateral policing agreements, the deployment of Frontex personnel, and the introduction of digital return infrastructures and biometric surveillance systems. These are often presented under the guise of technical assistance, regional cooperation, or humanitarian support. At the same time, the EU's political and financial investments have turned Serbia's geographical location and enforcement capacity into commodities, giving them operational legitimacy while denying the country the rights, protections, and decision-making power granted to member states. This asymmetrical arrangement positions Serbia both as an executor and as a product of EU externalisation policies. The text concludes that Serbia's experience is emblematic of a broader European trend: migration control is being outsourced; legal safeguards are being eroded; and rights are being distributed selectively. This is reshaping the very geography of European governance.

Keywords: EU border and migration regime, Serbia, externalisation, Western Balkans, sovereignty

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Over the past decade (2015–2025), Serbia has undergone a profound transformation in its role within the European migration landscape. Once portrayed as a peripheral transit corridor for people on the move, it has evolved into a strategic node in the EU’s externalised border regime, acting as a buffer zone, deportation hub, and testing ground for intensified securitisation, the deployment of foreign police, and new border control technologies and mechanisms.

Simultaneously, the European Union’s stance on migration has hardened significantly. Amid an increasingly repressive climate, marked by Brexit, the expansion of the Schengen Area, and the normalisation of internal EU border controls, the EU adopted the New Pact on Migration and Asylum after years of negotiations (ECRE, 2024a). Although it is presented as a ‘comprehensive reform’, the Pact has been widely criticised by human rights organisations and legal scholars for entrenching a deterrence-based approach and weakening procedural safeguards. It has also been criticised for formalising practices such as accelerated border procedures and mandatory solidarity mechanisms that risk normalising rights violations at EU and external borders (Caritas, 2024). In effect, the Pact codifies many of the abuses long observed at Europe’s margins, legalising what once existed in a legal and moral grey zone (Statewatch, 2024a).

The EU Action Plan for the Western Balkans, introduced in late 2022, is one of the preparatory arrangements for the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (Action plan for the Western Balkans, 2022). Framed as a partnership to manage migration “together,” the Action Plan institutionalised Serbia’s role, as well as that of neighbouring non-EU states, as a forward operating zone for European migration enforcement. Through its five pillars—border management, expedited asylum procedures, return and readmission, anti-smuggling measures, and visa alignment—the Plan reinforced a containment paradigm, prioritising deportation logistics and surveillance infrastructure over access to protection or rights-based frameworks. Civil society actors have warned that the Plan merely formalised longstanding practices of pushbacks, biometric surveillance, and administrative detention under the guise of technical cooperation (ECRE 2022; Klikaktiv, 2022a). Yet Serbia’s position in this architecture is marked by a paradox: it is being structurally integrated into the EU’s migration regime, while remaining formally excluded from the privileges, protections, and legal responsibilities that come with EU membership. It performs on behalf of Europe, but without access to the political space where those policies are negotiated. In doing so, Serbia has increasingly commodified its geographic position and its enforcement capacity, trading sovereignty for political leverage, and migration management for institutional legitimacy and funding. It has become a key executor of EU border policy, while remaining outside its formal legal order: governed by it, without governing within it.

In this text, I will present several aspects that mark Serbia's decade-long phase of accelerated integration into the EU border regime, analysing how migration governance has been reshaped through discursive, legal, and operational frameworks that extend far beyond formal EU membership. This integration is not just institutional; it permeates everyday practices relating to mobility, containment, and sovereignty. It redefines not only how borders function but also who Serbia governs, how it governs, and at what cost.

Representing migration in Serbia

Over the past decade, Serbia has witnessed a radical transformation in how migration is publicly represented, politically instrumentalised, and institutionally managed. What began in 2015 as an ostensibly humanitarian framing—people fleeing war and vulnerable families in need of protection—quickly devolved into a complex regime of discourse, characterised by suspicion and criminalisation. Ultimately, this led to erasure. Initially portrayed as passive “victims” deserving assistance, people on the move were gradually reclassified as “unwanted others,” depicted through metaphors of disease, security threats, and cultural contamination (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020).

This transformation was neither incidental nor simply reactive. It evolved alongside Serbia's deeper alignment with the EU's migration regime and reflected its bid for geopolitical legitimacy. As Serbia rebranded itself as a reliable partner in controlling Europe's periphery, it simultaneously absorbed and produced narratives that equated migration with disorder. The infamous 2016 speech by then Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić exemplified this turn: while paying rhetorical homage to Serbia's earlier “humane” policies, he cast people from Afghanistan and Pakistan as burdens whom “no one in Europe wants to see, let alone accept” (RTS, 2016), effectively legitimizing deportation, immobilisation, and confinement under the guise of national interest and EU alignment.

Media representations reinforced this shift through both spectacularisation and strategic silence. State-orchestrated images of migrant raids and military-guarded camps, as well as photographs of men kneeling with their hands behind their heads, served as demonstrations of control designed to reassure the public of the state's capabilities. At the same time, silence enveloped the structural violence within camps, routine pushbacks, and the criminalisation of humanitarian aid. These dual tactics of spectacle and erasure worked to construct migrants as either threats to be neutralised or non-subjects to be ignored (Stojić Mitrović, in print). Such discursive ambiguity enabled state in-

stitutions to oscillate between benevolent tolerance and open hostility without facing public scrutiny. Protests, particularly in border towns like Banja Koviljača, Sombor, and Subotica, played a foundational role in constructing people on the move as an existential danger. Protesters drew on familiar tropes of ‘protecting women and children,’ linking racialised fears with broader anxieties about demographic decline and economic scarcity (ibid.). They reconfigured everyday behaviours, such as walking in groups or shopping for bread, into acts of dangerous transgression. Protesters appealed to the state and not to people on the move, thereby reinforcing a discourse where people on the move were framed not as social actors but as objects, thereby reinforcing hierarchical governance in which the migrant became an object of policy, surveillance, and removal, and formalising a broader public acceptance of discriminatory policies.

These discourses were co-opted and expanded by far-right and vigilante groups, such as the People’s Patrol, who distributed flyers, threatened humanitarian workers, and patrolled public spaces in search of migrants. Their ideology fused Islamophobia with anti-Roma racism and antisemitic conspiracy theories, claiming that migration was part of a “Great Replacement” orchestrated by George Soros and liberal elites (Stojić Mitrović, in print). Social media, especially Facebook groups like STOP settlement of migrants, became hubs of incitement and fantasised retribution, framing people on the move as vectors of terrorism, sexual violence, and demographic erasure. Despite the extremity of content, including calls for physical harm and murder, platforms often failed to moderate or remove the hate speech, further normalising dehumanisation.

The outbreak of COVID-19 marked a turning point in the intersection of public health, migration, and militarised control while bringing securitisation to its peak. Camps were sealed with barbed wire and guarded by soldiers; public officials delivered photo-reports of enforcement; and people on the move were presented as both vectors of disease and objects of suspicion. The virus enabled the state to merge epidemiological and migration discourse, effectively constructing people on the move as both illegal and contagious (Hameršak and Stojić Mitrović, 2023). In this period, media reporting became nearly indistinguishable from police press releases. People on the move were shown surrounded by armed officers, while no attention was paid to their living conditions, asylum claims, or health outcomes.

Moreover, institutional discourse on migration in Serbia has become saturated with seemingly progressive buzzwords, terms like “holistic approach,” “sustainable migration governance,” “humanitarian returns,” and “people-centred strategy” (IOM, 2021). Promoted by international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and echoed by Serbian state institu-

tions, these formulations projected an image of modernisation and care. However, such language masks the coercive and exclusionary logic of contemporary border regimes (Stojić Mitrović, in print). It could be said that a “holistic approach” can instead refer to the integration of biometric surveillance, accelerated return procedures, digital identity systems, and enhanced interagency coordination rather than to the protection of rights or autonomy of persons on the move. Similarly, “people-centred” policies often entail managing, registering, and ultimately deporting people more efficiently. These buzzwords function as a form of humanitarian governmentality—rebranding restrictive practices in technocratic and depoliticised language designed to appeal to EU funders while obscuring structural violence. In Serbia, they mark not a shift toward inclusion but a deeper discursive alignment with the EU’s externalisation strategy, where border control is embedded within a bureaucratic and managerial logic of containment.

Otherwise deemed a cherished “partner of the EU”, Serbia faced intensified criticism from the EU on its migration governance throughout 2022 and 2023, framed in the language of geopolitics and security. Brussels accused Belgrade of undermining European border control by maintaining porous visa regimes and allowing the irregular entry of “unwanted” third-country nationals into the Schengen area (Pesavento, 2022). The EU’s frustration centred in part on Serbia’s visa-free travel arrangements with countries such as Tunisia, Burundi, and Cuba, which were perceived as loopholes exploited by unwanted migrants seeking to reach the EU through the Western Balkan route. Serbia inherited a visa-free regime from Yugoslavia. However, it also used visa lifting as a reward for states that de-recognised Kosovo. The criticism from the EU affected both groups of states. Following Serbia’s repetitive refusal to impose sanctions on Russia (Dragojlo, 2023a) and Banjska attack (Al Jazeera, 2023), armed assault of Serb militants on Kosovo police, Serbia was forced to make concessions: visa-free regime with many states was revoked. Examples include Tunisia and Cuba, with which Serbia had maintained visa-free travel since 1965. However, in 2023, it was necessary to abolish this to align policies with those of the EU (Pesavento, 2022; Tomović and Zdravković, 2023).

Throughout 2023, a series of violent and sometimes deadly shootouts between armed smuggling groups in northern Serbia were recorded, resulting in the unrest of local inhabitants (Thorpe, 2023). Under pressure from Brussels and in response to this securitised framing, Serbian authorities launched sweeping police operations in late 2023 and early 2024. These actions involved the deployment of more than 800 officers and special units—including drones, helicopters, and armoured vehicles targeting informal settlements, forest camps, and border zones (Global Initiative, 2024). The raids led to the detention of over 4,500 people on the move, the disruption of smuggling networks, and the forced

closure of several state-run accommodation centres, including those in Sombor, Subotica, Kikinda, Adaševci, and Principovac. As a result, the remaining reception centres became dangerously overcrowded, with conditions deteriorating rapidly and humanitarian oversight further diminished (*ibid.*; Djurovic, 2024).

By 2024–2025, people on the move had virtually disappeared from Serbian public discourse. Although their numbers remained statistically significant, their presence no longer generated political debate or media attention. Migration had been absorbed into the language of bureaucracy, technical issues to be “managed”.

Reports of abuse, such as the high-profile case of 70 persons pushed back to North Macedonia stripped naked and barefoot in freezing conditions (Fallon and Tondo, 2024), were swiftly deflected. Serbian officials denied responsibility, claiming that joint patrols by Austrian and Hungarian police operating along that section of the Serbian border at the time had not reported any such incident (Radoja and Anđelković, 2024). In other words, the very fact that foreign police were controlling Serbia’s borders and that Serbian authorities lacked oversight was presented as proof of procedural compliance. The institutional silence was not accidental; instead, it served as a deliberate strategy that normalized violence and obscured systemic neglect, ensuring that controversies remained contained within government narratives and excluded from public accountability.

Alongside these dynamics, new migration patterns have emerged. Within days of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, Serbian institutions opened streamlined registration channels, provided temporary protection, and facilitated access to housing and employment, measures rarely, if ever, offered to people fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, or Sub-Saharan Africa (Ilić, 2023). However, aside from occasional reports on decent conditions in the camps and on integration strategies for this group, the public space remained silent on this migration. On the other hand, the arrival of over 200,000 Russian citizens since 2022, fleeing repression and economic instability, has exposed the racialised hierarchies and ambivalences within Serbia’s migration governance and public discourse (Meyer, 2024). On the one hand, Russian nationals, many of whom were young professionals and tech workers, were welcomed as economic assets: they could rent apartments at above-market prices, open businesses, and invest in Serbia’s IT and service sectors. On the other hand, their arrival sparked anxieties around housing inflation, political neutrality, and surveillance (*ibid.*). While media coverage largely avoided overt hostility, official narratives remained cautious. Russian migrants were largely represented as apolitical guests or tolerated exiles and not subjects of integration, nor targets of welfare or humanitarian concern. In other words, they were folded into an economy of quiet opportunism. Politically active Russian citizens were subjected to retribution by the Serbian security agency—signing a petition to end the war in Ukraine or taking part in the

peace marches in Belgrade resulted in the revocation of resident permits in Serbia (Chastand, 2023). However, the majority of them managed to remain after public outcry (Radio Free Europe, 2024). A similar revanchist tactic of denying the right to stay was implemented in 2025 against EU citizens, especially those from Croatia, who were allegedly supporters of months-long anti-corruption protests in Serbia (N1, 2025a).

Similarly, the growing dependence on foreign labour, particularly workers from Asia engaged in Serbia's controversial construction boom, factory workers, and drivers, has revealed exploitative labour regimes operating beneath the veneer of legal migration. The growing presence of non-European foreign workers, particularly from Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Vietnam, has been rendered almost invisible in public discourse. Their recruitment, often mediated by private agencies under opaque contractual conditions, is rarely discussed in mainstream media. When it is, the emphasis lies on their utility rather than their rights. These workers are typically housed in employer-run compounds, face labour exploitation, restricted movement, and lack of legal protections, yet receive little public or institutional attention (Mašina, 2021; UN News, 2022). When they are mentioned, it is usually in the context of Serbia's labour shortages or foreign investments in infrastructure and construction. This functionalist representation, which views foreign workers as labour inputs rather than migrants, highlights the dual nature of Serbia's migration governance. While transit migrants are securitised and pathologised, labour migrants are commodified and depoliticised. Both groups are denied full personhood, albeit through different rhetorical approaches.

Thus, the representation of migration in Serbia from 2015 to 2025 is not reducible to any single image, rhetoric, or phase. It is a dynamic apparatus that operates through spectacle, silence, surveillance, and performance. Migrants are transformed from humans with rights into objects of policy, media framing, and political calculus. Whether demonised, instrumentalised, or erased, their visibility is always contingent, shaped by the needs of governance, the pressures of EU integration, and the political affordances of fear. The overlapping processes of externalisation, securitization, racialised governance, and selective inclusion have shaped Serbia's position within the European border architecture.

Serbia's integration into the EU border regime

Over the past decade, Serbia has become a key recipient of EU financial, technical, and political support to strengthen migration management and border control capacities. As part of the broader strategy of outsourcing the EU's hier-

archical border control regime, these investments have established Serbia as a buffer zone and enforcement partner, despite the country remaining outside the EU. This asymmetric alignment has been shaped by overlapping political agreements, conditional funding mechanisms, and cooperation between Serbian state institutions, EU agencies, individual EU member states, and international organisations.

The EU–Serbia Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), signed in 2008 and operationalised in the early 2010s, is a central framework guiding Serbia’s evolving role in the European migration and border regime. The SAA requires Serbia to gradually align its legal framework, institutional practices, and operational structures with EU legislation, including in the areas of migration management, asylum policy, and integrated border security (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). Building upon this foundation, the EU’s 2015 European Agenda on Migration (European Commission, 2015) and subsequent Action Plans for the Western Balkans explicitly incorporated Serbia into broader efforts to control unwanted migration, combat smuggling networks, and increase border security along the so-called Balkan Route. These frameworks provided both political direction and financial resources for Serbia to reinforce its border infrastructure, legal frameworks, and operational capacities in line with EU externalisation objectives.

Over the past two decades, Serbia has become deeply embedded in a web of regional initiatives and internationally funded programs aimed at controlling the unwanted migration to the EU by strengthening border control and aligning institutions with EU demands. These programmes differed in terms of their scope, formality, and the importance they placed on migration and borders. For example, they included a broad EU funding framework, such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA I & II);¹ a multilateral platform launched in 2009 that brings together over 50 countries from the EU, the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership states and Central Asia with ICMPD serving as the Secretariat, the so-called Prague Process,² which promotes coordination of migration strategies and legal frameworks, echoing EU priorities and models; all the way to informal regional diplomatic initiatives aimed at fostering cooperation between Western Balkans states under supervision of the EU, such as the Berlin process³ and the Brdo-Brioni process.⁴

1 More information available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en (4 January 2026).

2 More information available at: <https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/> (4 January 2026).

3 More information available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/> (4 January 2026).

4 More information available at: <http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/eu/regional-initiatives/brdo-brioni-process> (4 January 2026).

Taken together, these programmes demonstrate the EU's long-term strategy of investing in Serbia's migration governance, combining institutional development with control mechanisms. The economic aspect of these initiatives is also important: through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II and IPA III) alone, the EU has allocated substantial funding to Serbia for border infrastructure, surveillance technology, and capacity building. From 2015, Serbia received over €240 million in direct EU assistance for migration and border management projects.⁵ This includes investments in upgrading border surveillance systems, including thermal cameras, biometric databases, and automated control equipment, construction, and renovation of border crossing points, notably along the Hungarian, Croatian, and North Macedonian borders, support for asylum system development, reception centre capacity, and integration programmes, albeit with a growing focus on containment rather than protection.

Moreover, individual states have emerged as key external factors influencing migration governance in Serbia, often using IOM as a vehicle to implement technical, enforcement-oriented migration policies, thereby reinforcing Serbia's role in the EU's externalised border regime. For example, since 2021, Denmark has funded two major regional initiatives—the Western Balkans Readmission Capacity Building Facility (WBCAP) and the Integrated Border Management Capacity Building Facility (WBIBM)—focused on enhancing return procedures, digital surveillance, and regional coordination.⁶ These programmes culminated in the launch of the Regional Group of Readmission Specialists, which held its first meeting in Belgrade in October 2023. The group is responsible for coordinating electronic return case management systems (eRCMS) across the region.⁷ Workshops funded by Denmark have also focused on combating smuggling and trafficking, expanding the enforcement dimension of IOM's activities in Serbia.⁸ Austria has supported IOM's so-called assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes, a whitewashed deportation mechanism.⁹

These programmes have been implemented through a network of local stakeholders, including the Ministry of European Integration, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of the Interior, the Republic of Serbia's Commissariat for

5 More information available at: <https://www.euzatebe.rs/en/sectors/migration-management/about> (4 January 2026).

6 More information available at: <https://denmark.iom.int/news/launch-wbcap-wbibm-projects-funded-ministry-foreign-affairs-denmark> (4 January 2026).

7 More information available at: <https://serbia.un.org/en/251220-inaugural-meeting-regional-group-readmission-specialists> (4 January 2026).

8 More information available at: <https://serbia.iom.int/news/workshop-combating-migrant-smuggling-and-trafficking-human-beings-held-belgrade> (4 January 2026).

9 More information available at: <https://avrr-wb.com/> (4 January 2026).

Refugees and Migration, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Policy, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, as well as non-governmental organisations. International organisations such as IOM and UNHCR have been providing technical assistance, training, and operational support to Serbian institutions and migration officers, making them better equipped to meet the EU's demands.

These arrangements reflect not only Serbia's political alignment with EU migration control agendas but also its strategic use of migration governance as a tool for deepening bilateral relations and improving the economic situation by growing a new industrial complex: migration and border management.

Frontex and Serbia: from technical cooperation to deep border enforcement

Over the past decade, Serbia's relationship with Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has evolved from limited technical cooperation to full-scale joint operations, embedding Serbia deeper within the EU's externalised border regime. This transformation reflects the broader European strategy of shifting migration control beyond EU borders while exposing profound accountability gaps, sovereignty dilemmas, and human rights concerns.

The foundation for Frontex's involvement in Serbia was laid with the 2009 Working Arrangement, a nonbinding framework focused on training, risk analysis, and technical support (Frontex, 2009). Frontex has been regularly involved in deportation flights, returning Serbian citizens from the EU (Statewatch, 2012). At the time, Frontex lacked executive powers outside the EU. Since launching formal cooperation in 2016 via a Frontex Liaison Officer stationed in Belgrade (Frontex, 2016), Serbia has steadily deepened its integration into the EU's externalised border architecture. The focus shifted to foreigners transiting Serbia.

The 2019 Status Agreement marked a significant turning point. Signed in November 2019, the agreement granted Frontex the authority to deploy Standing Corps officers with executive powers on Serbia's borders with EU member states, including Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia (European Commission, 2019). Though Serbia resisted initial EU proposals granting Frontex personnel full legal immunity, insisting they remain subject to Serbian law, the agreement still embedded Frontex deeply within Serbian border infrastructure (Statewatch, 2017). Critics, including Statewatch, warned this setup risked undermining democratic oversight and fundamental rights protections, especially given Frontex's track record elsewhere in the Balkans.

Frontex formally launched its first joint operation in Serbia, “Operation Serbia-Land”, in June 2021, initially deploying 44 officers along Serbia’s southern border with Bulgaria (Statewatch, 2021). Over time, the contingent grew to approximately 140 officers, including foreign police units from Italy, Germany, Poland, and other EU states (MSF, 2023). Simultaneously, reports of systemic rights violations escalated. NGOs such as the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), No Name Kitchen, and KlikAktiv documented widespread pushbacks, beatings, forced relocations, and denial of access to asylum, often implicating Frontex-supported patrols (Argyle, 2024).

The amended Frontex regulation (Regulation (EU) 2019/1896) established the framework for enhanced Frontex intervention in Serbia. In June 2024, Frontex and Serbia renewed and expanded their Status Agreement, authorising Frontex deployments across Serbia, including at borders with non-EU neighbours such as Bosnia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo (European Commission, 2024). This reflects a significant geographic shift, effectively transforming Serbia into an extension of Europe’s external border.

The expanded mandate raised serious concerns: weakened legal safeguards, ineffective complaint mechanisms, and diminished transparency (Statewatch, 2025); increased violence, arbitrary detentions, and harsh conditions for people on the move, compounded by Frontex’s operational footprint (BVMN, 2024).

Despite mounting concerns, EU officials continue to portray the expansion as a success in curbing irregular migration and deepening cooperation with Serbia, framing the deployment of Frontex officers as merely supporting local border control—as though it were a response to Serbia’s own initiative (European Commission, 2024).

Foreign police deployment in Serbia, 2015–2025

Frontex and national police forces from EU member states have both been deployed to control migration across the Serbian border. Since 2015, Serbia’s borderlands have hosted officers from Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, and other EU states as part of both bilateral and trilateral cooperation agreements. These foreign officers, operating on Serbian soil, have gradually shifted from crisis-era emergency support to institutionalised enforcement actors, blurring lines between international cooperation, state sovereignty, and rights accountability.

The foundations of foreign police deployment were laid during 2015 through the discursive framework of the “refugee crisis”. In response, Hungary rapidly erected a border fence along its Serbian border and deployed additional border

guards. At the same time, it signed bilateral agreements with Serbia enabling joint patrols and surveillance operations. Austria soon followed. By mid-2015, the Austrian government had sent around 40 police officers, buses, and thermal cameras to assist Serbian forces. This move was cast as “technical support,” but in practice allowed direct Austrian enforcement capacity inside a non-EU state (Serbian Government, 2015). Throughout late 2015 and early 2016, Serbia hosted rotating contingents from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. These forces were deployed not only at Serbia’s borders with Hungary and Bulgaria but also deep within Serbian territory, often near transit routes and informal migrant camps. While the public framing emphasised cooperation and capacity building, the operational aim was clear: to prevent migrants from reaching EU territory.

After 2016, this ad hoc policing arrangement began to institutionalise. In February of that year, Hungary and Serbia reaffirmed their joint policing commitment, including data sharing and shared intelligence frameworks (Hungarian Government, 2016).

A more significant shift occurred on 16 November 2022, when Serbia, Austria, and Hungary signed a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding in Belgrade. The agreement, presented as a “strategic alliance” against irregular migration, promised the deployment of 100 Austrian officers, enhanced surveillance equipment, and closer operational coordination. Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer described the aim bluntly: “We must push the defense border further south.” The language of solidarity masked a reality of externalised enforcement—Serbia now served as the buffer zone for a securitised Europe (Szpala, 2022). This trilateral infrastructure was strengthened in July 2023, when the three countries signed a new agreement in Vienna. Its provisions expanded joint operations, formalised cross-border hotlines between police ministries and enabled foreign officers to act under Serbian jurisdiction with minimal oversight (Serbian Government, 2023).

By late 2023, Hungarian police officers were officially operating alongside Serbian authorities during raids near the Röszke–Horgoš border crossing. This deployment followed a shootout involving alleged smugglers on 27 October 2023, which resulted in several casualties. As a result, the Serbian Ministry of Interior announced that Hungarian officers would “join Serbian police in operations targeting the gangs involved” directly at the border zone, marking a significant shift from mere support to on-the-ground cooperation (Dragojlo, 2023b).

In an incident in February 2024, North Macedonian authorities requested an explanation from Serbia regarding 70 individuals who were reportedly stripped naked, beaten, and forced to cross into North Macedonia barefoot (Fallon and Tondo, 2024; Radoja and Anđelković, 2024). Although reports of violence by the Hungarian police decreased in 2024, since early 2025, dozens of refugees, inclu-

ding women, have described being physically assaulted by Serbian and Frontex officers during joint patrol operations since early 2025. The refugees have reported beatings to the stomach, back, and arms, as well as the destruction or confiscation of phones and chargers. These attacks have primarily affected individuals from Syria, Afghanistan, Morocco, Pakistan, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, and Turkey (APC-CZA, 2025a). Police officers from other countries, deployed under bilateral agreements with Serbia, operate without transparency or established channels of accountability. This reinforces a system of externalised enforcement that lacks legal oversight.

Serbia's transformation into a site of foreign policing reflects broader trends in EU migration governance. Bearing the banner of partnership and European integration, foreign states have sent their troops to Serbia to carry out border control operations that would be politically contentious and legally dubious within the EU. Although these deployments are presented as technical or supportive in nature, they effectively serve as instruments for deterring and containing migration.

Transforming the practices

From 2015, people on the move primarily arrived from Greece and North Macedonia, using informal footpaths and smuggler networks to reach Western Europe. They gathered in reception and asylum centres, informal camps, abandoned buildings, forests near the northern borders, and makeshift squats in urban centres such as Belgrade, Sombor, and Subotica. However, as this route became increasingly policed and borders securitised, many became trapped in Serbia (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020). Although the country's reception infrastructure was praised in early international reports, its limitations soon became apparent. Camps became overcrowded, poorly resourced, and were even militarised during the pandemic. These developments forced people on the move to increasingly rely on smuggling networks when attempting border crossings. Smugglers competed for control over routes and clients, resulting in violent clashes spilling into urban areas and prompting calls for stricter state intervention. As a result, spectacular police actions were staged—heavily mediatised raids, arrests, and camp clearances framed as crime-fighting measures. These spectacles dehumanised people on the move while simultaneously failing to dismantle the structural conditions fuelling the violence (Stojić Mitrović, in print).

Despite the visibility of these actions, many aspects of migration have become increasingly invisible. One striking example is the erection of the Serbian bor-

der fence towards North Macedonia. Discovered by Radio Free Europe journalists in 2020, during lockdowns, its purpose remains a total mystery (N1, 2020). Moreover, as border control and deportation systems became more integrated with EU mechanisms, public discussion of migration waned. NGOs documented frequent pushbacks, arbitrary detentions, and violence. Migrant deaths have also been increasingly reported, particularly in the forests and rivers near Serbia's borders. These fatalities, often unacknowledged and underdocumented, are a direct consequence of violent deterrence policies (Klikaktiv, 2025a).

The protection system deteriorated. The 2007 Law on Asylum and the 2008 Law on Foreigners were replaced by the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection and the Law on Foreigners in 2018, followed by amendments of the latter in 2019 and 2023. These reforms further aligned Serbia's system with the EU acquis. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) noted that procedural safeguards were often undermined in practice, including through limited legal aid, language barriers, and inadequate protection for vulnerable groups (BCHR, 2021). KlikAktiv's 2024 Annual Report revealed that only 219 asylum seekers applied for protection that year, and only seven of them received it. This highlights the systemic dysfunction and deterrence logic embedded in the asylum system (KlikAktiv, 2025b).

The system matured institutionally in tandem with Serbia's deepening cooperation with EU agencies. Through the EASO Roadmap, technical assistance programs, and bilateral training initiatives, Serbia began standardising procedures for asylum interviews, documentation, and detention practices (EASO, 2020). The establishment of a Migration Training Centre in Plandište marked the start of the formalisation of education in the sector of migration governance under the auspices of IOM. Simultaneously, migration was reframed through the language of technical expertise. The launch of a master's degree in Migration Studies in partnership with IOM¹⁰ and Serbian universities further depoliticized the subject, producing a new managerial class to govern, categorise, and contain migration, rather than challenge its injustices.¹¹ The bureaucratisation of migration discourse sidelines lived experiences and depoliticises structural violence.

Despite these institutional advancements, civil society actors have consistently documented the gap between legal frameworks and on-the-ground prac-

10 More information available at: <http://www.tcma.rs/en/tekst/17781/about-the-project-support-to-strengthening-migration-and-asylum-management-in-serbia.php> (4 January 2026).

11 More information available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/od-ove-godine-na-beogradskom-univerzitetu-nove-master-studije-o-migracijama/evsghlv> (4 January 2026).

tices. Reports by BVMN, No Name Kitchen, and APC-CZA described widespread pushbacks, arbitrary detention, police abuse and denial of access to asylum procedures, often implicating both Serbian and foreign officers. Many of these incidents occurred under opaque bilateral agreements or joint operations lacking transparent oversight mechanisms.

The geography of reception has also been dramatically altered. Beginning in 2023, the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration initiated the closure of more than half of the country's reception and asylum centres, citing reduced occupancy. While authorities claimed the closures were due to declining arrivals, NGOs linked them to EU pressure to contain and invisibilise migration. People on the move were increasingly pushed into informal squats, forests, and peripheral zones, often without access to water, healthcare, or legal aid. Simultaneously, research and media access to the remaining camps was restricted, obscuring the daily realities of containment and precarity. KlikAktiv estimated that by 2024, over 80% of migrants in Serbia avoided official centres, mainly out of fear of detention, deportation, or police violence (KlikAktiv, 2025b)

At the policy level, Serbia's alignment with EU priorities was formalised through regional declarations and cross-border frameworks. While the 2022 Skopje Declaration, facilitated by IOM and endorsed by the Western Balkan states, presented a vision of "sustainable migration governance," in practice, it prioritised interoperability, readmission, and returns over rights-based protections.¹² In late 2023, these efforts were further consolidated under the Western Balkan Return Mechanism (WBRM), a trilateral cooperation scheme involving ICMPD, Frontex, and EU Member States (Monroy, 2022). Framed as a regional solution to return and readmission "challenges," the WBRM aims to establish centralised digital return case management systems (eRCMS),¹³ harmonise return procedures across non-EU states, and facilitate joint deportations to countries of origin.¹⁴ For critics, it represents the formal institutionalisation of an externalised EU deportation infrastructure—one that outsources the coercive burden of removal while sidestepping EU legal obligations. Across all three programs, digital deportation systems, biometric data collection, and joint return operations have

12 More information available at: <https://northmacedonia.un.org/en/210755-skopje-declaration-paves-way-sustainable-migration-governance-western-balkans> (4 January 2026).

13 More information available at: <https://www.facebook.com/IOMWBalkans/posts/another-significant-step-forward-in-strengthening-the-return-management-systems-/753662694003093/> (4 January 2026).

14 More information available at: <https://globalofficebrussels.iom.int/news/iom-launches-eu-supported-initiative-strengthen-rights-based-return-management-western-balkans> (4 January 2026).

emerged as core mechanisms, effectively reinforcing surveillance and expulsion as the defining logics of governance.

These expansive investments in containment infrastructure have coincided with growing violence, more opaque enforcement practices, and the erosion of protections for people on the move. The performance of partnership, sustainability, and modernisation conceals a more profound authoritarian shift. Serbia has become a testing ground for EU externalisation policy—a laboratory in which containment is bureaucratised and violence is hidden behind institutional language.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Serbia has transformed, evolving from a peripheral transit state into a pivotal player in the European border control landscape. This change has not occurred suddenly, but rather as a gradual, deliberate process of aligning its structures with the European Union's agenda of externalising border controls. Through legal harmonization, technological upgrading, bilateral police deployments, and the proliferation of donor-funded programs, Serbia has been drawn ever deeper into Europe's migration enforcement system—yet always from the outside. It governs on behalf of the EU, but never within it.

Serbia's role in this regime is not merely a function of its aspirations to join the EU, but of a deeper dynamic: the commodification of migration control as a geopolitical asset. Serbia has increasingly traded its territorial and institutional capacity to control mobility for political leverage, development funds, and inclusion in European 'partnerships'. This role has been legitimised through the language of capacity building, regional cooperation, and sustainability. And yet, it has entrenched a governance model where rights protections are hollowed out, visibility is strategically managed, and violence is rendered administratively invisible.

Although EU officials and institutional actors portray this process as evidence of 'mature' and 'sustainable' migration governance, critical observers paint a different picture. Civil society organisations have documented routine denial of access to asylum, systematic pushbacks, racialised policing, and the deliberate removal of people on the move from public view. In Serbia, migrants are subject to selective inclusion and instrumentalised exclusion. They are welcomed when their presence aligns with foreign policy narratives, such as the case with Ukrainian refugees. They are tolerated when they are economically sound, such as Russian professionals. However, they are expelled or silenced when they are

deemed threatening, racialised, or politically inconvenient. Serbia's role goes beyond simply outsourcing EU border enforcement; it signals the emergence of a layered regime of integration without membership. In this regime, non-EU states carry out the most repressive aspects of European migration policy without receiving the rights, protections, or voice that full EU membership would provide. It exercises its sovereignty selectively, external logics increasingly shapes its policies, and it is rewarded not with accession, but with continued exception for its compliance.

As the EU's border regime becomes more formalized through instruments like the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, Serbia's position may no longer be exceptional; it may be prototypical. The country is a case study in how Europe governs its borders beyond its own territory, through delegated enforcement, the creation of racialised hierarchies of mobility, and the erasure of rights in favour of control. In this regime, protection is no longer a legal entitlement, but rather a discretionary privilege granted sparingly and revoked silently according to geopolitical usefulness.

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