

Balkan Route

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The term “Balkan route” is used to geographically localize and segment the movement between Southwest Asia and Europe. Depending on the broader registers in which it is used, the term takes on different meanings, from technical ones, emphasizing geographical positioning, direction or items (i.e. objects, knowledge, people, money, etc.), to political ones, emphasizing the specific relations within and between the Balkan states, as well as with other collective political subjects, such as the EU, and criminological ones, which format the Balkan route as an object of increased police interest and a place of development and implementation of securitarian practices, as well as cultural ones, which incorporates the Balkan Route into the stereotypical representations of the Balkans. These registers of meaning and their elements are opposed, interwoven and complement each other, thereby creating simplified, ahistorical, de-contextualized imageries of the Balkan route, ready to be instrumentalized in concrete socio-political interactions. Thus, the term Balkan route refers to different things depending on who is using it and in which context.

Although today we geographically associate the Balkan route with a unidirectional, primarily migratory movement from Turkey and Greece, through the countries of the former Yugoslavia to Austria or Italy, its topology is far from uniform. In different periods, in relation to different objects and directions of movement of those objects, it encompassed the territories of different states. Moreover, in certain articulations it even excluded what we today, due to normalization of viewing the Balkan route through the prism of migration movements in 2015, usually mean by this term. For example, in its report from 2008, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime described the Balkan route and mentioned the so-called northern direction, which completely omits Greece and the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and includes Afghanistan – Pakistan/Iran – Turkey – Bulgaria – Romania – Hungary or Ukraine – Slovakia or Poland – Austria or Germany (UNODC 2008: 61).

The term Balkan route comes from police and security service circles, where it was used exclusively in the context of two-way smuggling of narcotics and weapons (UNODC 2008). The movement of people, i.e. migration, started to rival drugs and weapons as items moving along the Balkan route during the 1990s. People primarily from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, but Iraq as well, fleeing wars and difficult political and economic situations, were moving towards the countries of the European Union, which influenced a more radical coordinated securitization of the European migration policy (*Strategy* 1998; Hess and Kasperek 2022) and the fledgling idea of establishing the concept of the route as one of the central objects (but also tools) of migration control and governance (Hess and Kasperek 2022; Hameršak et al. 2020). This period was marked by the first discursive formation of the Balkan route as a unidirectional migration route, and the Balkan countries emerged as the dominant countries of origin or transit for people on the move, especially those who, in their destination countries, are most often administratively categorized as asylum seekers and refugees. However, the term Balkan route continued to be mentioned almost exclusively in professional discourses, i.e. it was used by the police, security services, politicians, humanitarian and other civil sector organizations. The situation practically remained the same until 2015 and the **long summer of migration**, when the term entered the broader public discourse directly from the securitarian one: the former Frontex, today’s European Border and Coast Guard Agency, identified the so-called Western Balkan migration route as one of the five main migration routes leading to the countries of Western and Central Europe, and one of the two land migration routes.

The securitarian-criminological register through which the Balkan route is observed is intertwined with the perceptions and discourses about the Balkans as a disordered, chaotic, linguistically and, above all, politically fragmented space, crisscrossed with closed borders of states born in bloody ethno-national conflicts from formerly economically and politically more powerful complex political entities (Riedler and Stefanov 2021). These representations are reflected in the relationship between two contemporary collectivized political subjects, the EU and the **Western Balkans**, which are in asymmetric and antagonistic relations. These cultural, political and criminological registers interwoven in the context of paternalistic neo-colonialism saw intensified migration movements from Greece and Turkey to the countries of Central Europe during 2015. A specific image of the Balkan route emerged in the media at that time, portrayed as a synecdoche for the so-called refugee/migration crisis, which is dominated by images of long lines of people walking through the fields and roads of the Balkan states, people in parks, crowded train carriages, people trying to board trains, etc. In the public discourse, the Balkan route and the extra-legal formalized migration corridor, which was formed at the end of the summer of 2015 and enabled an internationally coordinated and state-organized reception and transit of people from the Greek-North Macedonian border, through Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia to Austria and further, were practically

merged into a single concept. The discursive combining of the route and the corridor went to such an extent that it led to a misconception that the closure of the corridor meant the Balkan route was closed as well, i.e. that the agreement between the European Union and Turkey, which entered into force on 18 March 2016, resulted in a complete cessation of migration from that direction, and further by land to Central and Western Europe (Obradovic-Wochnik and Stojic Mitrovic 2016).

During the period of the gradual closure of the corridor, which started with the introduction of **profiling** in November 2015, a new wave of securitization happened at the external southeastern land borders of the European Union. This new wave of securitization was manifested in stricter border controls, the erection of fences, an increase in the number of border services, introduction of new technologies, usage of dogs, drones, smart fences etc. In addition to physical obstacles, practices such as **pushbacks**, arbitrary detention and restriction of freedom of movement, etc. were applied, as well as changes in laws or their interpretations which legalized such repressive practices (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020). The denial of asylum rights and other forms of protection became more widespread, criminal codes related to illegal entry and stay in the territory of countries were tightened, as well as the provisions for offering assistance to people whose stay is not legally regulated (this represents the **criminalization of solidarity**). In the coming years, and especially from 2018, when Bosnia and Herzegovina became its dominant section, the Balkan route again entered the focus of wider public discourse. However, this time the dominant images were not of the unidirectional hypertransit, lines of people and movement, but images of people being stuck, camps, poor living conditions, violence, forced circulation (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020). In the public discourse, this is paradoxically presented as a consequence of the traditionally poor management of migration (and other sectors) in the Balkan states. In this covert externalization, the influence of the EU and individual Member States, using their position of power and conditioning the Balkan states in various ways by instrumentalizing their tenuous economic and political situation, while in fact financing and directing this management, remains in the background.

Contrary to the increasing invisibility of migration movements along the Balkan route, they are in fact becoming more and more spread out, as people constantly try to find new paths to their desired destination. In addition to forced stay, as a consequence of their incapability to continue the journey, the situation is marked by **forced** movement, changing direction, returning, circling, repeated border crossings, searching for new, often riskier ways to advance. This is why it is becoming technically more difficult to speak of the Balkan route, and people in academic circles have resorted to using the term the **Balkan circuit**, which, as a product of securitization practices, but also in resistance to them, is becoming the dominant form of migration movements following the closure of the formalized corridor. Thus, the Balkan route is becoming more of a dead end, and, instead of an antechamber, a kind of back yard of the **zoned** European Union used to corral unwanted people on the move (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020).

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