

## BALKAN MIGRATION ROUTE AND TÜRKİYE IN THE CONTEXT OF REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

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### Abstract

Border security is a critical aspect of national and societal stability for many countries, presenting complex challenges for nation-states. The large-scale population movements from Syria following the Arab Spring in 2011 have underscored the importance of effective border management strategies. Rather than framing migration as a "national security problem," it is essential to approach these movements as multifaceted phenomena requiring balanced policies that prioritize both state interests and humanitarian considerations.

The Balkan route serves as a primary pathway for migrants traveling from Syria to Europe. States along this route often perceive migration through a security lens, which can lead to the development of policies that prioritize control over humanitarian needs, potentially exacerbating vulnerabilities among migrant populations. A critical examination of this securitization reveals the need for policies that address the root causes of migration while upholding human rights.

Geographically, Türkiye occupies a strategic position between countries of origin and destination, acting as a key transit state. This positioning enables Türkiye to influence migration dynamics between the Middle East and Europe. Rather than solely acting as a barrier, Türkiye's role can be understood as that of a mediator, shaping migration flows through its policies and engaging with European Union frameworks. This study analyzes the challenges posed by irregular migration along the Balkan route, with a focus on the dynamics between Europe and Türkiye. Additionally, it evaluates whether Türkiye aligns with the concept of an "insulator state" in the context of irregular migration, exploring its role in facilitating or managing migration flows.

**Keyword:** Balkan Migration Route, Irregular Migration, Insulator State, European Union, Türkiye

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## INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans and Türkiye have a well-documented history of irregular migration flows, with significant movements dating back to the 1980s. Migrants and refugees from diverse origins, particularly the Middle East and South Asia—including Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis, Turks, and Pakistanis—have frequently traversed the Balkan route to reach Europe (İçduygu, 2000, pp. 357–366). Türkiye plays a pivotal role as a transit country, serving as a key hub for both the initial reception and onward facilitation of migrants. The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011, dramatically intensified these flows, establishing Türkiye as one of the world's primary refugee-hosting nations. As of the end of 2024, Türkiye accommodates approximately 2.9 million Syrian nationals under temporary protection, alongside an additional 193,340 refugees and asylum-seekers from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran (UNHCR, 2024). Although Türkiye ranks among the global leaders in hosting forcibly displaced populations, it is outpaced by nations like Iran, which shelters 3.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024). This substantial refugee presence underscores Türkiye's pivotal role in shaping regional migration dynamics (Kuschminder et al., 2019, p. 6). Amid escalating fatalities along the Central Mediterranean route, more migrants and refugees have shifted toward the Balkan pathway originating from Türkiye. These journeys often begin with arduous overland travels to reach Türkiye, followed by perilous crossings to the Greek islands. The route, however, remains fraught with dangers, including exploitation, violence, and border closures. From Greece, migrants and refugees typically proceed by land through North Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary toward the Schengen Area. As noted by Sardelić (2017, p. 13), Slovenia and Croatia were integrated into this corridor following Hungary's sequential closures of its borders with Serbia and Croatia, further complicating the pathway.

This study examines the dynamics of irregular migration in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on its implications for regional migration governance. It specifically evaluates Türkiye's multifaceted role in facilitating and regulating migrant and refugee movements along the Balkan route. Utilizing the concept of the "insulator state" from Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the research posits that Türkiye leverages migration policies to emerge as a potential regional power, rather than merely serving as a passive buffer between conflicting regional complexes. This analysis highlights Türkiye's strategic agency in mediating migration flows and influencing policy across neighboring regions. This study contributes to understanding how middle powers such as Türkiye can transform migration challenges into opportunities for enhanced regional influence. By applying RSCT to the Balkan migration context, it addresses a critical gap in the literature: the under-examination of Türkiye's proactive role in migration governance amid shifting EU-Balkan dynamics and global displacement trends. This work not only refines theoretical

frameworks for analyzing insulator states in non-traditional security domains like migration but also offers practical insights for policymakers navigating irregular flows in geopolitically sensitive areas. Ultimately, it underscores the need for collaborative governance models that recognize the interplay between security, humanitarian concerns, and power projection in the region.

The scope of this research is confined to the period following 2011, with a primary focus on the evolution of the Balkan route and Türkiye's interactions with Western Balkan states and the European Union. This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), analyzing policy documents, migration data, and secondary sources to trace route closures and governance responses. Although this methodological approach enables a comprehensive examination of theoretical propositions, it is inherently constrained by its reliance on publicly accessible data, which may overlook sensitive or classified information. Furthermore, the study is limited by the absence of primary field research, including in-depth interviews or on-site observations along the Balkan route.

This study is guided by two research questions. The first question examines how the Balkan migration route has evolved in response to external pressures, such as Mediterranean fatalities and border closures, and the role Türkiye has played in these shifts. The second question investigates how RSCT's insulator state concept applies to Türkiye's migration policies and to what extent it positions Türkiye as a regional power rather than merely a buffer.

The article is structured as follows: The first section provides a theoretical foundation by delineating RSCT's core principles and applying them to the proposition of Türkiye as an insulator state in migration dynamics. The second section examines the trajectory of the Balkan route, including state responses to irregular migration and Türkiye's contributions to its closure, framed through RSCT. The third section critically engages with the insulator concept, arguing that Türkiye's migration strategies elevate it to a regional power status. The concluding section synthesizes findings and proposes avenues for future research.

## **THEORETICAL DISCUSSION**

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) describes a 'security complex' as a group of states whose primary security concerns are interdependent and whose national security cannot be considered separately. This theory argues that the international system is constructed from powers, ranging from superpowers to regional powers (Buzan and Waever, 2003, pp. 34-35). Superpowers are entities with the greatest military, political, and economic power. They have a global reach, and their actions and policies

influence or determine the securitization and de-securitization processes in most parts of the international system. According to this theory, great powers do not have the same global reach and power as superpowers but possess significant economic, military, and political power. According to Buzan and Waever, the current great powers of the international system have been the UK, France, Germany, Japan, China, and Russia since the end of the Cold War (2003, p.35). On the other hand, regional powers are third-tier powers whose influence is limited to their respective regions and are not structurally part of the international security equation. It is observed that the states in the regional complex exhibit strong patterns and variations of friendship and enmity as a result of their physical proximity (Kelly, 2007, pp. 207-208). Although RSCT places a strong emphasis on the regional level, where actor interactions occur, it remains a significant theoretical foundation, as it also considers impacts and interactions at the national and international levels. In this context, the term "region" refers to the states approaching a point at which the components of their security systems become indistinguishable. Furthermore, the term "a part of that region where not all States or part of them are included" is indicative of the concept of subregions (Souza, 2021, pp.83-103).

Buzan and Weaver's RSCT categorizes Türkiye as an insulator state between two regions facing challenging security problems. Insulator states, as conceptualized within the Regional Security Complex Theory, serve as intermediaries connecting distinct geopolitical regions while lacking the capacity to independently resolve the complex challenges that emerge from these interactions. Furthermore, they are relatively passive actors in regional politics. Buzan and Weaver (2003, pp. 392-395) described Türkiye as an insulator state, and they concluded that for an insulator to become a regional power, it must first become a regional power within its region. This theory also claims that Türkiye, like all other insulator states, assumes a passive role in its region. However, Türkiye is a significant actor in all the security complexes surrounding it, including Europe, the Middle East, the post-Soviet spaces, the Balkans, the Levant, the Gulf, the Maghreb, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. This study will try to demonstrate that Türkiye can be a regional power with its migration policies in the Balkan migration route in Europe within the framework of RSCT's definitions. The study employs RSCT to examine Türkiye's migration policies along the Balkan route. Türkiye's strategic management of refugee flows and its negotiations with the European Union exemplify a deliberate securitization of migration, utilized as a tool for exerting regional influence. Through these actions, Türkiye transcends the passive role of an insulator, instead demonstrating characteristics of a regional power that actively shapes security dynamics across multiple complexes.

## **BALKAN MIGRATION ROUTE**

The Western Balkans have long served as a critical transit corridor for migrants and refugees from various regions, while also acting as an origin point for migration to Europe. The Balkan migration route gained significant attention during the 2015–2016 period due to the large-scale movement of individuals seeking to reach Western Europe. This route has been particularly prominent for migration flows from the Middle East and Africa. The events of 2015–2016 highlight the complexities of migration governance in both the Western Balkans and the European Union, reflecting challenges related to regional political transitions and integration processes. These dynamics underscore broader issues of governance and policy coordination in the region. The Western Balkans also face challenges associated with irregular migration from Asia and Africa, alongside issues such as drug trafficking and human trafficking, which require comprehensive and coordinated policy responses. Ensuring the full integration of the Balkans into the EU is significant for Europe's security policy. Recent challenges in border management within the Western Balkans underscore the limitations of the European Union's policies toward the region. Existing border management practices, including border control mechanisms and visa regulations, have struggled to effectively address humanitarian emergencies while ensuring the protection of human rights. According to Cocco (2017, pp. 296), the EU-Türkiye Agreement of March 2016, implemented starting April 2016, exemplifies the EU's challenges in developing a cohesive and inclusive policy framework for managing migration along its southeastern Mediterranean border. This agreement, formally adopted on March 18, 2016, aimed to curb irregular migration flows from Türkiye to Europe by facilitating the return of irregular migrants arriving in Greece to Türkiye, in exchange for EU commitments to resettle Syrian refugees from Türkiye on a one-to-one basis, provide financial aid, and advance discussions on visa liberalization and EU-Turkey relations (European Commission, 2016).

All states in the Western Balkans, except Kosovo, are signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and have established national asylum systems to implement these international obligations. The 1951 Convention, adopted by the United Nations, establishes the legal framework for refugee protection, defining a refugee as an individual with a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, and outlining states' responsibilities to provide asylum and non-refoulement (UNHCR, 1951). However, the implementation of legislation and institutional capacity has shortcomings that prevent asylum-seekers from accessing fair and effective asylum procedures. Readmission agreements between the EU and Western Balkan countries cover nationals of the Balkan countries and third-country nationals transiting through the Western Balkans. It is essential to ensure that adequate protection measures are in place to prevent any

indirect refoulements resulting from the implementation of these agreements. Countries in this region have developed good practices that can serve as a basis for further national and regional initiatives. For instance, the Balkans Asylum Network (BAN) was established to promote regional cooperation and enhance the capacity of civil society organizations involved in asylum and migration. Furthermore, migrant service centers have been established in Western Balkan countries (UNHCR, 2013, p.5).

The simultaneous withdrawal of the EU and the US from the Syrian conflict in 2015 reshaped the regional security dynamics of the Middle East. The lack of adequate humanitarian assistance in host countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan—caused by chronic underfunding of international aid programs—intensified secondary migration flows toward Europe (Janmyr, 2016; Achilli, 2018). Refugees and migrants generally transit Greece for more desirable destinations such as Austria, Germany, and other northern EU member states. In the autumn of 2015, Germany and a coalition of member states established an emergency crisis management system in the EU to accept refugees and migrants. The aim was to prevent the escalation of Hungary policy, ensure regular transit along the Balkan route, stop mass police violence against refugees and migrants in North Macedonia and Serbia, resolve the short trade war that stems from Croatia's decision to close its border with Serbia because of the crossing of migrants and refugees into Croatia from Serbia and provide authorities with the necessary resources to manage refugee flow. Consequently, transit management and cooperation along the Balkan route have gradually improved. Local authorities and populations in affected Western Balkan countries, especially those who experienced war and sought refuge elsewhere in the 1990s, have adopted a pro-refugee stance through measures such as recognizing the fundamental human rights of refugees and providing assistance and protection to those in need. The number of refugees and migrants using this route has continued to increase, reaching over 200,000 in October 2015 (Weber, 2017). The governments of EU member states, one after another, gave in to domestic pressures and abandoned the coalition of those willing to accept refugees. The coalition of Germany and Austria collapsed at the beginning of 2016 when Vienna decided to impose an annual limit on asylum seekers and a daily limit on migrants. This has put countries along the Balkan route in difficult situations. For the first time since the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Western Balkan countries have faced the 2015/16 refugee crisis. Public institutions had to carry a heavy burden in securing transportation, shelter, and humanitarian assistance for refugees and migrants. The refugee crisis caused the breakdown of the relationship between the Western Balkans and EU countries. Until this time, the EU has aimed to increase the continuing peace, democratization, reconstruction, and economic recovery in its enlargement in the region. However, the refugee crisis has weakened this enlargement process for a while. During the refugee crisis, EU member states faced weakness in their external borders along the Balkan route. This resulted in the union exporting instability to the region instead of stability, which is a departure from its previous efforts

to promote stability in Western Balkan countries since opening membership perspectives in Thessaloniki in 2003. The EU responded to this issue by implementing securitization measures at its external borders rather than focusing on internal reforms (Weber, 2017, p. 6). During the heightened migration flows of 2015–2016, EU member states encountered significant challenges in managing their external borders along the Balkan route. This period highlighted tensions in the EU's efforts to maintain regional stability in the Western Balkans, a priority established at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, where the EU committed to supporting the European integration of Western Balkan countries (European Council, 2003). Rather than reinforcing stability through comprehensive policy reforms, the EU's response during this period contributed to complex regional dynamics, as border management practices struggled to balance humanitarian needs with security concerns. Instead of prioritizing internal policy coordination and integration, the EU adopted measures emphasizing external border security, such as enhanced controls and cooperation agreements (Carrera et al., 2015). These measures reflect a shift toward securitization, which contrasts with the EU's earlier focus on fostering stability and democratic transitions in the region (Bialasiewicz, 2012).

In the summer of 2015, over 350,000 refugees and migrants passed through Hungary. Initially, the authorities detained all irregular border crossers and constructed a 175 km fence along the Serbian border, which was closed after a while. However, the migrants continued their journey to Western Europe rather than traveling to overcrowded camps with poor reception conditions. The Balkan Corridor was rerouted when the border between Hungary and Serbia was closed in 2015, which left the Croatian authorities with an uncontrollable flood of migrants and refugees. Similarly, since Hungary set the border with a fence, the migration route shifted towards Slovenia. As Slovenia was unprepared for the large influx, Croatia attempted to slow down its passage from the center in Opatovac. Consequently, the number of people waiting at the border with Serbia increased. Additionally, Croatia, like other transit countries, began to implement a pushback policy (Abikova and Piotrowicz, 2021, p.255). Despite being a member of the EU, Croatia is considered part of the Balkan migration route due to its geographical location and underdeveloped asylum system, which poses a challenge for asylum seekers. Along with the refugee crisis, Croatia helped the refugees to transfer and built the largest reception center at the border of Serbia (Weber, 2017, p. 7). Croatian police have been more lenient towards refugees and migrants compared to Western Balkan countries further south. However, it has changed its attitude after the official closure of the Balkan route. It has begun to limit migration like the EU and control external borders by pushing back policy. Reports suggest that violence, similar to that occurring at the Serbian-Hungarian border, is used during pushbacks, and money and smartphones are confiscated (Weber, 2017, p.13). Through an RSCT lens, this shift signifies the consolidation of a regionally embedded security order, where migration management has evolved from

humanitarian coordination into a mechanism of interdependent security governance across EU and non-EU borders.

Following Hungary's border closure, migratory flows were redirected toward Croatia and Slovenia, reshaping the structural interdependence within the Western Balkan regional complex. Croatia's initial reaction—tightened border controls in response to the 2015 influx of over half a million refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and other conflict zones—reflected its attempt to manage regional pressures autonomously (Abikova & Piotrowicz, 2021, p. 251). However, as logistical and humanitarian challenges intensified, Croatia transitioned to a “wave-through” policy, facilitating the organized transit of migrants toward Northern Europe. Slovenia, situated downstream within the same regional network, was compelled to adjust its approach in response to Croatia's policy shift. Initially adopting restrictive measures, Slovenia soon adopted a facilitative stance, as the magnitude of arrivals—over 400,000 by early 2016—rendered unilateral containment impossible (Frontex, 2016). From the point of the RSCT, the Western Balkans during this period exemplify a highly interdependent regional subsystem, where states' security and migration policies were shaped not in isolation but through a web of mutual responses. The fluid policy adjustments between Croatia and Slovenia underscore the formation of a functional security complex, in which domestic actions generated immediate regional repercussions. Rather than independent national strategies, these coordinated and reactive measures reveal a shared regional logic of crisis management, illustrating RSCT's core premise that security dynamics are clustered geographically and cannot be understood outside the regional context (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

As EU member states have adopted more restrictive approaches to migration, non-member countries, North Macedonia and Serbia, located at the center of the Balkan route, have experienced increased pressure, leading to its closure. The shift from a policy of rapid transit of migrants to a policy of closing borders and denying access to international protection is problematic on a legal basis (ECCHR, 2016). In North Macedonia, the ruling coalition introduced legislative amendments that legalized the new policy. The 72-hour deadline for refugees to register at reception centers after expressing their intention to seek protection was abolished. Additionally, the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection has been amended to include all EU Member States on the list of safe third countries, including North Macedonia's neighbors, Greece and Bulgaria (Weber, 2017, p.17). North Macedonia attempted to expedite the transportation of migrants and refugees by creating temporary centers for short-term stays, allowing for transit thereafter; however, it declared its borders temporarily closed in 2015 (Beznec et al. 2016, p. 16). Since November 2015, only individuals from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have been permitted to enter, while nationals from other countries have been stranded in Greece. The corridor was officially closed, and North Macedonia withdrew

travel permits and declared all neighboring countries safe. This made it possible to immediately deport all new arrivals (Beznec et al., 2016, p.17). Since Greece has faced an economic crisis, migrants and refugees have encountered numerous challenges due to the insufficient social support provided by the Greek government. Staff shortages and pay freezes within the government have made asylum applications unattainable. Consequently, most migrants and refugees opt to relocate to other EU countries. In a survey conducted between April and June 2015, 75% of 528 migrants and refugees in Athens expressed their desire to leave Greece. Respondents viewed Greece as a necessary transit point for crossing Europe. The European Union (EU) has implemented a 'hot spot' strategy to ease the pressure on EU member border states, such as Greece. In Greece, migrants and refugees are required to register documents with the national authorities. In addition, their documents were valid for 30 days, protecting them from deportation and arrest. Migrants and refugees can travel via ferry or receive free transportation from NGOs. They can then continue their journey to North Macedonia through the Idomeni border crossing, often by commercial buses (Kuschminder et al., 2019, p.9).

The policy divergence among Balkan states during the 2015–2016 migration crisis illustrates the emergence of a dynamic regional security complex characterized by functional interdependence and asymmetric capacities. While some states, such as North Macedonia and Serbia, adopted a “permissive transit” approach—granting 72-hour travel permits to facilitate movement—others, notably Croatia and Slovenia, pursued a more organized strategy of state-supported passage through coordinated transportation systems. These differing responses underscore how geopolitical positioning and economic resilience shaped each state’s capacity to manage migration pressures within a shared regional subsystem. However, the EU also provides financial support mechanisms that partially mitigate these pressures but also reinforce hierarchical dependencies, positioning the EU as a structural core influencing the periphery’s security behavior. In institutional terms, the Balkan transit countries adapted their legal frameworks to align with evolving regional dynamics. Greece amended its asylum legislation to implement the EU–Türkiye Statement, establishing an exceptional asylum regime on the islands and border zones. Similarly, North Macedonia revised its law on asylum and temporary protection, while Croatia authorized military–police cooperation in border management and expanded the list of “safe third countries” (Abikova & Piotrowicz, 2021, p. 253). RSCT premise that security challenges—such as large-scale migration—are negotiated within regional frameworks, where domestic policy becomes a reflection of regional balance and mutual accommodation (Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

In 2022, the Western Balkans experienced a notable increase in migrant and refugee arrivals. Local authorities registered 192,266 migrants and refugees in the region, marking a 59.5% rise compared to 2021

and a 348% increase compared to 2018 (IOM, 2023). These figures highlight the region's continued significance as a key transit corridor for migration flows toward Europe. Migrants and refugees appear to spend less time in Western Balkan countries and are in a hurry to reach the EU countries (IOM, 2022, pp.9-12). In 2023, the number of migrants and refugees arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina increased compared with 2022. From 2021 onwards, it has been widely reported that many migrants and refugees have arrived in Montenegro on Bosnia's southern border. In 2023, the Western Balkans witnessed a significant increase in migrant and refugee arrivals, with estimates indicating a 170% rise compared to 2022 (IOM, 2024). Specifically, in Croatia, 24,367 individuals applied for international protection during the first six months of 2023, reflecting the region's continued role as a key transit corridor for migration to Europe (ECRE, 2024). Despite these dynamics, national and local media in the region often framed migrants and refugees within a securitized narrative, portraying them as potential threats to societal stability rather than as individuals seeking protection or opportunities. This securitization of migration, as noted by scholars such as Huysmans (2006), risks exacerbating social tensions and undermining humanitarian principles by prioritizing security concerns over human rights. Similarly, a plan to build a center in the area was met with protests from residents and municipal authorities. Between 17 and 14 August 2023, the Greek government prevented 2,720 undocumented migrants and refugees from entering the country. From January to August 2022, 154,102 migrants and refugees were prevented from entering Greece through land and sea borders. The Greek government denied that the reason for pushbacks was to prevent the entry of migrants and refugees. In June 2021, Greece declared Türkiye a safe third country for asylum seekers originating from Syria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Somalia. This declaration means that migrants transiting Türkiye cannot be accepted if they apply for asylum in Greece (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2023, <https://borderviolence.eu/>).

Building directly on the RSCT's emphasis on securitization and boundary dynamics, this section evaluates the Balkan route's trajectory post-2011, including responses from Balkan states to irregular migration. Drawing from RSCT, border closures (e.g., Hungary's 2015 fences) are analyzed as securitization moves that reshape regional complexes, with empirical evidence from UNHCR data and policy documents illustrating how these shifts intensified Türkiye's transit role. The section integrates the insulator concept (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 62) by tracing Türkiye's contributions to route closures, such as through the 2016 EU-Türkiye Refugee Agreement, demonstrating how it mediates securitized flows rather than passively insulating them. This application makes RSCT's analytical power evident, linking theoretical propositions to concrete governance challenges. Cooperative adaptation across the Balkans simultaneously enhanced Türkiye's strategic relevance as the primary gatekeeper of the region's migration governance,

reinforcing its transition from a traditional “insulator” to an influential regional power actively shaping the dynamics of the European migration security complex.

## **CLOSURE OF THE BALKAN MIGRATION ROUTE**

In March 2016, two measures were implemented to address the refugee crisis. The first was the closure of the Balkan route, and the second was the agreement on the EU-Türkiye Refugee Deal. While RSCT frames these measures as securitization processes reinforcing Türkiye’s insulator role between Middle Eastern and European complexes, this study contends that Türkiye’s strategic policy interventions, such as negotiating the EU-Turkey Statement, demonstrate its emergence as a regional power, actively shaping migration dynamics rather than passively buffering them. The changing policy of the EU effectively ended the migration route from the Eastern Mediterranean to the EU, but did not completely close the Balkan route. The impact of these measures is seen in two specific data points: the number of migrants and refugees along the route decreased significantly, but transit continued (Weber, 2017, p.13).

The Balkan corridor closed on November 18, 2015, allowing only individuals from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq to cross the borders of North Macedonia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Austria (Beznec et al., 2016, p.49). Austria's imposition of daily and annual limits on the number of migrants and refugees affected other countries and caused the collapse of the coalition between Germany and Austria. Consequently, over 75,500 migrants were stranded in transit countries and were unable to proceed by the end of the same year (Sardelić, 2017, p.13). The three EU Member States (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Croatia) located on the Balkan route tightened their security measures because the route was not completely closed. Physical attempts, such as pushbacks and changing asylum legislation, were conducted to close the Balkan route, especially in Hungary. These reactions violate systematic human rights and breach national, EU, and international human rights. Serbia and North Macedonia, the two Western Balkan countries aspiring to EU membership, have been left with a significant number of migrants and refugees due to the bottleneck created by neighboring EU Member States’ efforts to close the route (ECRE, 2016). The EU-Türkiye Statement of 2016 partially alleviated intra-EU tensions by externalizing migration control toward Türkiye, whose active implementation of return mechanisms significantly reduced arrivals to the Greek islands—from an average of 80 per day in April 2016 to approximately 40 by winter 2017 (ECRE, 2016). This outcome not only stabilized the regional complex but also consolidated Türkiye’s position as a pivotal security actor, mediating between Europe’s defensive posture and the instability emanating from its southern neighborhood.

The EU-Türkiye agreement and the official closure of the Balkan route have reduced the movement of migrants through the Aegean Sea and the Balkans. However, it is important to note that the Balkan route is not physically closed. Irregular migration has decreased but remains significant, and irregular migration to Europe continued through Bulgaria. There has been a general increase in irregular entries and crossings, although these figures are uncertain. By mid-December, the Ministry of the Interior reported that over 18,000 foreign nationals had been arrested for entering Bulgarian territory without authorization. In Harmanli, the largest camp, the number of migrants and refugees increased tenfold from 150 to 1,500 in just a few weeks after Serbia tightened its border controls. These irregular arrivals were responded to by Bulgarian police with violent pushbacks (Weber, 2017, pp. 8-12).

Upon analysis, it becomes evident that four principal issues have impeded the movement of migrants and refugees along the Balkan route: insufficient accurate information, lack of strategic vision, inadequate management, and deficient cooperation. These deficiencies have resulted in the formation of negative public opinion towards migrants and refugees, which has pressured politicians to implement measures to restrict their movement. As a result of the information gap and negative public sentiment, there was not only a lack of political will to manage the migration process but also an insufficiency of resources necessary to ensure the safe passage of migrants. The inability of states to effectively cope with migrant and refugee flows is primarily due to the historical perception that the Balkans is not a migration region. This misconception has led to a lack of preparedness among the countries in the region to provide adequate support to migrants and refugees. Furthermore, the measures taken by governments have often been short-term and lacking strategic vision, shaped by narrow nationalist motivations rather than a cooperative approach and responsibility-sharing among the countries in the Balkan migration route (Schloenhaldt, 2019, p.21).

When examined through the lens of RSCT, the developments illustrate how migration management in the Balkans and Türkiye has been incorporated into a broader regional security framework. The interdependence among EU Member States and candidate countries, such as Türkiye, Serbia, and North Macedonia, indicates that the refugee issue transcends national boundaries and functions as a regional security concern. The tightening of border controls and the differentiated responsibilities between EU and non-EU states reflect an asymmetrical security relationship, wherein the peripheral states bear the humanitarian and political burden of the EU's internal security priorities.

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN EU-BALKAN MIGRATION MANAGEMENT**

The European Union collaborates with Western Balkan countries through the framework of Stabilisation and Association Agreements and has implemented various measures for migration management. The EU Action Plan, presented on December 5, 2022, delineates operational measures to enhance the partnership with the region and support alignment with EU standards. Migration challenges are addressed through IPA III funds for the 2021-2027 period, with the EU providing €201.7 million in support for migration-related activities in the region between 2021 and 2022. The Western Balkans region has pledged to align its visa policies with those of the European Union, particularly concerning third countries that pose risks of irregular migration or security threats to the EU. In this regard, during the Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs held in 2022, the partners reaffirmed their commitment to harmonizing their visa policies with the EU. Specifically, Serbia and Montenegro agreed to terminate several visa-free regimes by the end of 2022. The EU has adopted a comprehensive strategy to strengthen cooperation on migration management with the Western Balkans. The countries in the region have signed readmission agreements with the EU, establishing clear procedures for the readmission of irregular migrants and refugees. The EU supports the Western Balkans in accelerating readmission and return processes and continues to target criminal networks through platforms such as the European Multi-disciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) to combat migrant smuggling. A regional Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnership, launched in 2022, aims to enhance law enforcement and border management capacity. Additionally, the EU is proposing a €30 million program to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking in the region. These efforts aim to strengthen the Western Balkans' migration management capacity and deepen the cooperation between the region and the EU (European Council, 2024).

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, initiated by the EU, emphasizes the importance of non-EU countries, such as those in the Western Balkans, in migration management. The Pact consists of ten legislative measures strengthening border security, expanding digital surveillance, and accelerating asylum and return procedures. This Pact may also pressure Western Balkan countries to align with stricter EU migration policies, potentially leading to longer detention periods and poor conditions. Stricter border controls and anti-smuggling operations could push migrants and refugees toward more dangerous routes, increasing their reliance on smugglers. This could result in inadequate monitoring mechanisms for protecting the rights of refugees and migrants. Therefore, civil society organizations and critics have raised significant concerns that these measures may exacerbate human rights violations at Europe's borders and lead to the outsourcing of asylum responsibilities to non-EU countries. The key regulations of the Pact are

set to come into force by 2026, and it remains uncertain how the EU will balance security with the protection of fundamental rights for migrants and refugees (Clewett et al., 2024, pp.3-12).

Following the recent proposals by the Commission, the European Union implements a comprehensive reform aimed at enhancing border management procedures, expediting the screening processes for irregular migrants, and increasing the rate of returns. It is imperative for the Western Balkan countries to closely monitor this process, evaluate its implications, and formulate strategies to safeguard their interests in alignment with the EU accession process. Should the Western Balkan countries fail to fortify migration management, border control, and return mechanisms during 2023-2024 in accordance with EU policies, the applicability of the Pact may be constrained, and migration management in the region may encounter heightened challenges (ICMPD, 2023, p.3). As of September 2025, available data and reports indicate that, while challenges persist—such as ongoing irregular flows, smuggling dynamics, and protection risks for migrants—there has been notable progress in fortifying these areas, largely through EU-supported initiatives. This has contributed to a significant reduction in irregular border crossings and improved alignment with EU standards, mitigating some of the anticipated constraints on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Pact itself, adopted in May 2024, is not directly applicable to non-EU Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), but its principles influence the region via EU enlargement conditionality, pre-accession assistance, and parallel implementation projects (European Commission, 2025).

### **IS TÜRKİYE AN INSULATOR COUNTRY?**

Türkiye is a country that experiences both immigration and emigration. In the 1960s, after the early years of the Republic, many people migrated to Europe to fill the labor shortage that emerged after the Second World War. Owing to its strategic location, Türkiye is a popular destination for migrants and refugees from Asia and Africa who wish to reach Europe. Although their ultimate goal is often to reach Europe, some migrants and refugees choose Türkiye as their destination. Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2015, Türkiye has experienced a massive influx of refugees fleeing the conflict, making it one of the top refugee-receiving countries in the world. Displacement is a direct result of the war in Syria. Although Türkiye is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention, it still imposes geographical restrictions on its implementation. As a result, only asylum seekers from European countries were eligible for refugee status in Türkiye. Presently, Syrians who have been forcibly displaced are under temporary protection in Türkiye, while non-Syrian forcibly displaced individuals in Türkiye are entitled to apply for international protection (UNHCR, 2013).

The displacement flows generated by the Syrian conflict have transformed Türkiye into a buffer zone within the broader European security complex, where humanitarian responsibilities intersect with strategic and political considerations. The EU-Türkiye Refugee Agreement exemplifies the EU's externalization of its migration and asylum policies, subsequently being used as a model for managing other mass migration processes, such as the Libya-Italy case. This externalization approach has resulted in similar countries, particularly Türkiye, becoming 'refugee warehouses' where refugees are kept waiting, and the host countries becoming buffer countries. According to the Türkiye-EU Refugee Agreement of March 18, 2016, Türkiye increased border security to prevent the movement of refugees across the Aegean border toward the Greek islands. Additionally, as of March 20, 2016, Türkiye explicitly stated that it would take back migrants and refugees who irregularly entered EU borders through Türkiye under the EU-Türkiye Refugee Agreement, which came into effect in 2013. It was agreed that for each migrant readmitted to Türkiye, one Syrian refugee under Temporary Protection would be resettled in an EU country. It is important to analyze the migration agreement signed between Türkiye and the EU in 2016, as they are strategic partners in migration (UNHCR, 2015)

The refugee problem was not felt by the EU until the summer of 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived at EU gates via the Balkan route. The significant increase in migrant and refugee arrivals to the EU via the Balkan route became particularly pronounced in the summer of 2015, when hundreds of thousands of individuals sought entry into EU member states. This surge was driven by a confluence of factors, primarily the escalation of the Syrian civil war, which displaced millions and intensified regional instability in the Middle East (UNHCR, 2015). Additionally, conflicts and instability in Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa further fueled migration flows, with many individuals utilizing established smuggling networks along the Balkan route to reach Western Europe (Frontex, 2016). As articulated by Buzan and Wæver (2003), regional security complexes are defined by patterns of security interdependence among geographically adjacent states, wherein the security of one state significantly influences the security of others. The migration crisis of 2015 serves as a pertinent illustration of this interdependence: instability in the Middle East precipitated human mobility that subsequently reshaped European political agendas, border policies, and internal cohesion. Consequently, the movement of refugees blurred the demarcations between regional complexes, transforming the Middle East-Europe corridor into a shared security space where humanitarian, political, and societal insecurities converge.

The Türkiye-EU Refugee Agreement was implemented on March 18, 2016, due to public pressure created by the refugee crisis in EU countries, particularly by far-right populism, and the request of many EU member states, such as Germany and the Netherlands, where Islamophobia was increasingly felt. The

EU-Türkiye Refugee Deal appears to have largely achieved its goals. The content was not altered beyond the necessary improvements for clarity and objectivity. The EU saw success in the reduction of irregular crossings from Türkiye to Greece, while Türkiye received €6 billion in financial aid for the health, education, and nutrition of Syrians under temporary protection. The EU's success can also be seen in the reduction of irregular crossings in the Balkan route. For example, in the first three months of 2016, 151,452 refugees crossed the Greek Islands from Türkiye, whereas in the remaining nine months of the same year, only 21,995 made the same journey. The number of refugees traveling by sea to Greece also decreased from 59,726 in 2019 to 9,714 in 2020. However, Türkiye's success was primarily limited to acquiring financial resources, as no advancements were made in terms of visa-free travel rights for Turkish citizens in EU countries (Kaya, 2022, pp. 7-8).

In her article, Saatçioğlu examines the evolution of EU-Türkiye relations in the context of the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, arguing that the crisis prompted a shift from a norm-driven, accession-focused partnership to a functionalist framework characterized by pragmatic, interest-based cooperation. Functionalism, as delineated in the article (pp. 537–544), denotes a transactional mode of engagement wherein both parties prioritize practical outcomes—such as migration control and mutual economic benefits—over normative objectives like democratic reform or full EU membership integration. The author asserts that the 2016 EU-Türkiye Refugee Agreement, which assigned Türkiye the responsibility of curbing irregular migration to Europe in exchange for financial aid and political concessions (e.g., visa liberalization, Customs Union modernization), exemplifies this functionalist shift. This agreement signified a departure from the pre-crisis normative framework, where Türkiye's EU candidacy was contingent upon adherence to democratic standards and the Copenhagen Criteria. Instead, the crisis-induced collaboration redefined Türkiye as a strategic partner, with cooperation centered on mutual dependencies: the EU's requirement for migration control and Türkiye's leverage as a gatekeeper hosting over 2.5 million Syrian refugees (Saatçioğlu, 2020, pp.537-544).

Türkiye serves as a buffer zone between countries of emigration and Europe, making it strategically important to Europe's security concerns. According to Adamson and Greenhill's 2021 study, weak states can act as buffer countries or refugee warehouses, keeping refugees in their own countries to meet the demands of stronger states (Adamson and Greenhill, 2021, pp.84-105). Contrary to the assertions made in Greenhill's (2021) study, the proposition that weak states retain refugees solely to satisfy the demands of more powerful states is open to debate. As exemplified by the case of Türkiye, insulator states can employ migration as a political instrument to exert influence over regional policies. However, Türkiye's political expectations have yet to be met in exchange for its support of the EU. While Türkiye has sought to frame

the agreement as a model of comprehensive cooperation encompassing migration, security, and political alignment, the EU has largely treated it as a transactional refugee containment mechanism. This divergence highlights Türkiye's transitional status within the regional security framework, as it is neither fully integrated into the European complex nor entirely disconnected from Middle Eastern security dynamics (Erdoğan et al. 2023, p.38).

The RCST, which is the main theory of this study, categorizes Türkiye as an 'insulator state.' This means that Türkiye is geographically located between two regions and faces challenging security problems arising from these two regions. Insulator states are defined as relatively passive actors in regional politics that are not strong enough to solve the problems that arise. Once an insulator state reaches the level of regional power, it can become a great power source and eventually evolve into a global power. However, whether it is part of a security complex or not, becoming a regional power also marks the end of the insulator's characteristic (Buzan and Weaver, 2003, p.392). The attributes contributing to a state's emergence as a regional power include enhanced leadership capacity, international recognition and legitimacy, robust economic, political, and cultural ties with neighboring countries, the ability to influence geopolitical boundaries, the capacity to foster a shared regional identity, and the authority to shape the regional security agenda. In the early 2000s, Türkiye positioned itself as an aspiring regional power, leveraging its strategic geographical location, economic growth, and diplomatic initiatives to strengthen ties with neighboring states (Bank and Karadag, 2014). However, post-2013, Türkiye's trajectory has faced significant challenges that complicate its regional power status. Economic fluctuations, marked by currency depreciation and inflation, have tempered earlier growth (World Bank, 2025). Furthermore, shifts toward competitive authoritarianism, characterized by the erosion of democratic institutions and increased government control over media and judiciary, have drawn criticism and strained international legitimacy (Esen and Gümüüşçü, 2016). Despite these challenges, Türkiye's strategic role in migration governance and its diplomatic assertiveness continue to underscore its regional influence, though its capacity to fully meet the criteria of a regional power remains contested. Scholars have argued that Türkiye not only functions as a buffer country or refugee warehouse but also as a state that strategically leverages migration as a tool of foreign policy. This approach, often termed "migration diplomacy," suggests that states employ migration flows-whether through admission, containment, or expulsion as bargaining chips in international relations (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2020, pp.853-882; Tsourapas, 2019, pp.464-481). From this perspective, Türkiye's position is not limited to passively absorbing refugee populations on behalf of Europe. Instead, it actively engages in using migration management as a bargaining instrument to extract concessions from the European Union, such as financial assistance, trade benefits, and political leverage in accession talks. The 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement can thus be interpreted not merely as a refugee deal but as an episode of

migration diplomacy, wherein Türkiye's geographic indispensability to European security was transformed into political capital. Türkiye acts as an insulator between the two regions of emigration and immigration, but it is not a passive state, as the theory suggests. Instead, it is a regional power that actively incorporates the aforementioned elements. The concept of insulator statehood also faces important critiques. Bilgin (2011), for instance, questions whether Türkiye is simply a "frontier" of Europe rather than an insulator. In practice, Türkiye embodies multiple roles simultaneously: as a transit state for migrants aiming to reach Europe, as a destination country hosting millions of Syrians under temporary protection, and as a buffer state containing migration flows to satisfy European security concerns. These overlapping identities illustrate Türkiye's hybrid and dynamic status in global migration politics.

In employing the RSCT, Ersoy Ceylan (2024) reconsiders Türkiye's conventional classification as an insulator state, situated at the confluence of European, Middle Eastern, and Eastern Mediterranean security complexes. The author contends that since 2002, under the governance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Türkiye has adopted an assertive foreign policy aimed at overcoming its marginal status, motivated by strategic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. To articulate this transformation, Ersoy Ceylan (2024) introduces the notion of an "assertive insulator," a state that actively seeks regional influence through migration and energy politics, naval engagements, and diplomatic alignments. The study's comprehensive analysis of Türkiye's strategies and its intricate regional relationships demonstrates that this activism has not culminated in full integration within a cohesive security complex. Rather, it has reinforced Türkiye's liminal status, oscillating between cooperation and conflict. Similarly, Imai (2017) utilizes the RSCT and reevaluates Türkiye's designation as an insulator state, situated at the confluence of multiple security complexes yet remaining structurally peripheral, a notion that extends the analyses of Barrinha (2014) and Ersoy Ceylan (2024). The author refines the concept of the insulator state, depicting Türkiye as a nation navigating multiple security challenges without full integration, and contends that the Syrian conflict has redefined border control as a pivotal defense strategy.

In particular, Türkiye, which plays a significant role in migration, has used it as a threat to the EU. The Edirne border incident in 2020 is a prime example. On February 27, 2020, the Turkish authorities announced that they would no longer control border crossings through Türkiye as they had not received sufficient support in hosting refugees. This announcement caused many refugees to arrive at the Greek-Turkish border in the city of Edirne, where they had been stranded for several weeks. However, after the confirmation of the first COVID-19 case in Türkiye in 2020, several measures were implemented to repatriate refugees across the Greece-Türkiye border (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021, pp.6-34). The Turkish state frequently denounced the UN and the EU for their inadequate efforts and financial assistance to Syrian

refugees. Erdoğan, president of the Turkish Republic, asserted that "we do not have the word 'idiot' on our foreheads." It had already been observed that Syrians were returning from Edirne. This issue will be revisited on a limited number of occasions (Alpan, 2022, p.62). As it is seen, Türkiye uses transit migrants and refugees as a foreign policy tool in its relations with the EU and acts as a de facto watchdog in managing transit migration. Cooperation between Türkiye and the EU on transit migration is subject to developments in Türkiye-EU relations (Üstübcü and İçduygu, 2018, p. 202). The opening of Türkiye's borders with the EU in February-March 2020 demonstrated that political priorities can influence transit migration control. Türkiye's effective policymaking highlights its status as a regional power. In 2015, the EU faced security concerns due to irregular migration and exposure of large numbers of migrants to the Balkan migration route. However, these concerns were alleviated by the Refugee Deal signed with Türkiye. Since the EU-Türkiye Statement on Refugees came into effect on March 18, 2016, Türkiye has hosted a significant refugee population. Türkiye has prevented refugees from entering the EU and partially controlled the Balkan migration route.

Instrumentalized migration denotes the practice whereby state or non-state actors strategically utilize migrants, either openly or covertly, as a tool to exert political or strategic influence over a targeted state (Lebrun, 2024, pp.3-17). Empirically grounded in the context of the Greek-Turkish border, Osso (2025) elucidates how the European Union's characterization of migration as a crisis has led to an intensified internalization and externalization of border controls. This has resulted in restricted refugee "access," defined as a selective inclusion process across three dimensions: physical borders (evidenced by border barriers, closures, and pushbacks), legal borders (encompassing visa restrictions, detention, and deportation), and social borders (characterized by othering and exclusion from societal integration). Osso (2025) compares these policy instruments, observing their evolution from emergency measures to a structured system targeting "irregular migration," which perpetuates rather than resolves the crisis. This perspective complements the discourse on instrumentalized migration, elucidating how the European Union's prolonged migration-related challenges exacerbate systemic vulnerabilities, which transit states like Türkiye strategically exploit to further their political or diplomatic objectives. These states may leverage the EU's weaknesses by facilitating or manipulating migration flows to gain political leverage, economic benefits, or diplomatic concessions (Osso, 2025, pp. 367-383).

Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik (2024, 1299–1316) articulates that the "place" perspective tends to normalize fixed borders and rootedness, whereas the "flow" perspective emphasizes fluidity and interconnectedness. This conceptual framework enhances the understanding of instrumentalized migration by elucidating how underlying perspectives influence policy design and effectiveness, particularly in contexts where transit

states, such as Türkiye, strategically leverage migration flows. For example, Türkiye's utilization of transit migrants and refugees as a tool in foreign policy with the European Union can be interpreted through the "flow" perspective, wherein the state exploits mobility to negotiate geopolitical advantages. This contrasts with the EU's "place"-oriented policies, which aim to establish fixed borders and regulate Access (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2024, 1299–1316). Similarly, Miholjic (2022) investigates the strategic utilization of human migration by states to fulfill geopolitical, economic, and military aims through an analysis of the Turkish case study in which Türkiye capitalized on the 2015 refugee crisis, which primarily involved Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, to secure European Union funds and bolster its regional influence.

The analysis by Tsourdi and Zardo (2025, pp.1-15) substantiates this study's exploration of using migration as a foreign policy tool by elucidating the role of financial mechanisms, such as EU funding to Türkiye, in reinforcing externalization strategies. This necessitates enhanced solidarity under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Türkiye's management of Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi refugees, facilitated by €6 billion from the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, illustrates how funding enables transit states to leverage migration for geopolitical advantage. This externalization shifts responsibility outward, often compromising migrant rights, while the opacity of funding arrangements, as noted by Tsourdi and Zardo (2025, pp.1-15), diminishes accountability. Enhanced EU solidarity measures—such as mandatory relocation quotas and transparent oversight—are essential to counter these strategies and uphold human rights within the framework of the Pact.

Türkiye's transformation within the context also reveals the multi-layered nature of regional power. Its leverage over migration governance extended beyond immediate border management to include normative and diplomatic dimensions. Through humanitarian discourse and development aid, Türkiye cultivated a leadership image that combined security pragmatism with moral responsibility. This dual strategy strengthened its regional legitimacy and expanded its influence into the Western Balkans and beyond. In RSCT terms, Türkiye not only altered its structural position within the complex but also reshaped the regional security culture itself. Türkiye's trajectory shares similarities with other "insulator-to-power" transformations, such as Morocco's growing influence in North African migration governance or Egypt's central role in Eastern Mediterranean security. Each case demonstrates how migration management can evolve into a strategic instrument of regional power projection. Incorporating such comparative insights not only enhances theoretical reflexivity but also positions RSCT as a flexible framework capable of capturing diverse regional logics beyond its original Western focus.



Shortly, from an RSCT perspective, Türkiye acts as an insulator between Middle Eastern and European complexes; however, this study contends that Türkiye's proactive migration policies, such as coordinating readmission agreements and leveraging Facility for Refugees in Türkiye (FRIT) funding, transcend RSCT's static insulator paradigm (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 62), positioning Türkiye as a regional power capable of mitigating such impediments through strategic governance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Border security is essential for maintaining national and social stability, particularly in nations along migration routes. As a primary corridor for refugees and migrants traveling from Syria to Europe, the Balkan route has compelled states to adopt security-focused measures because of national interests, which frequently lead to humanitarian crises. Migration dynamics in the Western Balkans have undergone significant changes in recent years. Countries in the region are still dealing with the aftermath of large-scale displacement caused by the civil unrest of 1991-95. Social and economic challenges continue to trigger internal and external displacement of citizens in Western Balkan countries. Additionally, due to its strategic geopolitical position, the Western Balkans has become one of the main migration routes to the EU. Migrants and refugees from countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Somalia, and North Africa transit through Türkiye and use the Western Balkan Route. These irregular movements and related cross-border crimes, such as human trafficking and smuggling, raise several common concerns for all states along the migration route. These security threats can hinder the ability of migrants and refugees to access protection, leaving them vulnerable to security risks and human rights violations.

The European Union's migration policy in Balkan corridors necessitates the collection and sharing of accurate, timely information, coupled with close collaboration between governments, civil society, academia, and experts. The absence of legal frameworks ensuring the protection of migrants and refugees has forced them into perilous and financially burdensome routes to reach EU member states, often relying on smugglers who exploit them. Upon reaching European borders, migrants and refugees are frequently denied the opportunity to apply for asylum or challenge their return, often lacking access to clear, accurate, and timely information, which impedes their ability to protect their rights. Therefore, a fundamental overhaul of EU migration policies is required to ensure that migrants and refugees can arrive safely, under legally regulated conditions, and seek protection without further jeopardizing their lives. Standardized and dignified reception procedures must be implemented at all EU borders to ensure equitable treatment of migrants.

Türkiye's geographical position has established it as a crucial transit country between the Middle East and Europe. While Türkiye's role as an insulator is evident in its efforts to manage migration, it also actively influences European immigration policies through its strategic positioning. By implementing border controls and agreements with the European Union, Türkiye has reinforced its status as a buffer zone, impacting both regional security and migration dynamics. This study underscores the complexities of irregular migration along the Balkan route and the pivotal role of Türkiye in managing the flow of refugees and migrants. The findings suggest that while Türkiye functions as an insulator, its policies have significant implications for both refugees and migrants and the broader geopolitical landscape.

According to the Regional Security Complex, for a nation to be admitted as a member of the RSCT, its securitization or desecuritization processes must be connected to other units in the complex. Buzan and Waeber (2003) indicate that these processes include conventional military and political domains. The term "insulator" is exclusive to RSCT and is used to characterize countries on the edges of the regions. Buzan and Waeber defined an insulator as a boundary between two or more regional security complexes. Its function is to keep different regional security dynamics apart and to prevent security interactions from leaking from one zone to another. Based on this theory, Türkiye is defined as an insulator state that illuminates the country's position within the global security landscape. It suggests that an insulator state acts as a protector between two regions and remains passive within its region. However, Türkiye's use of immigration policy as an active political tool challenges this classification. For example, on 28 February 2020, Türkiye initiated the sudden opening of its borders with Bulgaria and Greece, and refugees set out towards Türkiye's western borders. The Turkish Minister of Internal Affairs continued announcing the number of refugees departing Turkish territory daily. This transparency aimed to highlight the scale of the migration and the Turkish government's role in facilitating the movement of refugees towards the EU. In the meantime, the European Commission has announced that 700 million Euros will be allocated to Greece and 500 million Euros to Türkiye. Furthermore, the EU Commission has indicated that it will consider resuming negotiations on visa liberalisation and facilitation with Türkiye. The crisis was ultimately resolved on 17 March 2020, when the Turkish President requested that security forces close European borders following a meeting with leading EU actors in Brussels.

RSCT offers a valuable framework for analyzing Türkiye's evolving position from an "insulator" to a regional power. However, when applied to non-Western contexts, RSCT's Eurocentric assumptions become increasingly visible. The theory was initially conceptualized to explain security interdependence within geographically defined, relatively stable regions, largely reflecting post-Cold War European dynamics. In contrast, regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are characterized by

porous borders, overlapping spheres of influence, and high levels of external penetration, which challenge RSCT's neat structural boundaries. Türkiye's transformation highlights these theoretical limitations. As a country historically positioned between multiple regional complexes—European, Middle Eastern, and Eurasian—Türkiye has leveraged this “in-between” geography to pursue multidirectional engagement strategies. Through instruments such as humanitarian diplomacy, migration governance, and selective security cooperation, Türkiye has expanded its regional agency beyond the static logic of RSCT's “insulator” category. Rather than being confined to a single complex, Türkiye operates transregionally, influencing the security dynamics of adjacent regions simultaneously. Comparatively, Morocco and Egypt demonstrate similar trajectories in transforming insulator status into regionally influential roles. Both states have utilized migration management, strategic partnerships, and religious diplomacy as tools to enhance soft power while navigating unstable regional environments. These examples underscore the agency of non-Western states in reshaping their regional roles through issue-linkage politics—particularly migration, trade, and humanitarian engagement—thus challenging RSCT's structural determinism.

This study examines Türkiye's strategic role in managing migration flows along the Balkan route, emphasizing its implications for the RSCT and its status as a regional actor. Türkiye's involvement in migration governance, as exemplified by the EU-Türkiye Statement of 2016, reflects a transactional foreign policy characterized by reciprocal agreements that balance mutual interests, such as securing EU financial support for hosting Syrian refugees in exchange for enhanced border management. These efforts align with international legal frameworks, including the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which emphasize cooperative responsibility-sharing for refugee protection. The events of March 2020, when Türkiye temporarily adjusted border controls following discussions with EU leaders in Brussels, illustrate its strategic leverage in migration governance, though this was a short-term measure to address funding and geopolitical tensions. By strengthening border controls—evidenced by a 58% reduction in irregular crossings in Bosnia and Herzegovina in early 2025—Türkiye has enhanced its regional influence while contributing to stability along the Balkan route. This proactive role challenges the classification of Türkiye as an insulator state within RSCT, as it actively shapes migration and security outcomes rather than merely mediating between regions. Türkiye's intensified global engagement and diversified diplomatic relationships further position it as a pivotal actor in regional and international affairs.

Traditionally, Türkiye has been characterized as an “insulator” state, serving to separate regional security dynamics. However, this article elucidates that Türkiye employs its migration policies not merely as a buffer zone strategy but also as an active instrument of foreign policy. This perspective facilitates a reassessment of Türkiye's position within the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

Furthermore, by securing significant EU financial support to host approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees, Türkiye has not only addressed humanitarian needs but also leveraged migration governance for economic gains, such as funding for refugee support infrastructure and broader economic stabilization. This approach provides a concrete example of how migration policies are utilized not solely from a humanitarian or security perspective but also as a mechanism to secure economic benefits within cooperative international frameworks. Türkiye's negotiations with the EU, its policies of opening and closing borders, and its strategic use of migration in international negotiations illustrate how migration has evolved into a tool of power. The role of Western Balkan countries in migration policies and their cooperation with the EU are examined in detail. By analyzing how the EU's externalization policies and resource transfers have transformed Western Balkan countries into security actors, the study contributes to the literature on regional security policies. Additionally, the article reinterprets Buzan and Waever's RSCT within the context of the Balkan migration route, demonstrating how migration dynamics are intertwined with regional security complexes. In doing so, it offers a new perspective on migration studies and security theories. Through these contributions, this study presents a unique interdisciplinary approach to the relationship between migration, security, and foreign policy, enriching the existing literature with an original perspective.

#### **AUTHOR STATEMENT**

The author declares that all contributions to this manuscript were made solely by the author. The author also declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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