Migration in the Western Balkans has been contextualized within various intersecting narratives of crises for decades. The positioning of the region within the East/West dichotomy strengthens the narrative of being in perpetual crisis and also its othering. However, are these migration and related “crises” endogenous to the region or are they driven by external processes? Are there any lessons learnt from past crises which help in navigating through current and future ones? And, is this “crises lens” helpful at all for the region, or is there a need to move beyond crisis narratives altogether?

The region of the Western Balkans is characterised by increased migration diversification (Zitranova, 2014), but the complexity of the migration picture is rarely captured within migration studies. It is most commonly scrutinized within the framework of negative demographic changes and “brain drain”. It is frequently presented narrowly as a ‘sending’ region, through which people transit; a region that constructs migrants as a security threat, as opposed to a humanitarian concern, and which prioritises bordering over humanitarian responses. Contrary to that dominant perspective, MIGREC team wanted to look into particular neglected aspects of migration in the Western Balkans – migration flows, processes, relations and practices that contribute to the political, economic, and social development of societies within the region.

Accordingly, MIGREC team aimed to advance debates and scholarship on migration beyond the narratives of crisis in the Western Balkans and give them contextualized meanings. We positioned the Western Balkans at the centre of the debate, challenging widespread perceptions of peripherality. We aim to explore more nuanced multi-level responses to migration and extend beyond state actors and a one-dimensional focus on securitization. This shifts the focus from security to humanitarian responses and concerns, and accounts for policy, media and behavioural lenses. We were also interested in capturing divergent experiences as related to different groups of migrants (irregular, regular and returnees), but also to variegated responses, in the Western Balkans region.

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research & Innovation programme under Grant Agreement no. 857261.
Prof. Russell King debated on the issues of the position of migration studies in contemporary conditions. Starting with the types of migration, from the classic to the contemporary ones, Prof. King pointed to problematic binary divisions and a series of turns in migration studies. Even more problematic, migration has a history of being politicised through a series of generally negative tropes, which need to be questioned to reveal a more objective ‘truth’ about migration. The words migration, migrant, immigration, immigrant, asylum-seeker, refugee, etc. carry a certain baggage; they are not neutral terms, even if they should be. Rather, they are manipulated and instrumentalised, especially in public discourse designed to win support for populist anti-migration policies.

Dr. Angeliki Dimitriadi presented the consequences of the New Act on Migration and Asylum for the countries of the Western Balkans, with the focus on the innovated solutions of the European Union. Dr. Dimitriadi focused on the challenges associated with pre-screening procedures and consequent periods outside the asylum procedures. She pointed to challenging accommodation for irregular migrants and services offered to them, highlighting the need to prioritize the reception, which has been too long of critical importance. Relations between the European Union and the region of the Western Balkans are the relations of mutual dependence. Therefore, there is a need for capacity building and development, migration “diplomacy” and negotiation between all stakeholders involved.

Areas of interest

- Migration and development nexus (e.g. migration and socio-economic landscapes, migration patterns – causes and consequences, labor migration and human capital, emigration and socio-political mobilisation of diaspora/diaspora engagements, social and financial remittances, transnational perspective of ‘migrants’, ‘diaspora’ and ‘transnational community’, climate change, etc.).

- Migration governance (e.g. bordering/de-bordering practices, racialization, mobilities to and from the Western Balkans, NGO-ization of migration governance in the region, resistance and grassroots solidarity, etc.).

- Integration of migrants (critiques of integration, integration in receiving societies, including gender-specific inequalities, forced migration and post-conflict integration, political, economic, social, cultural dimensions of integration, etc.).

For the Conference agenda, click here:

Plenary sessions

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Panels

**Perspectives on migration from the Western Balkans**
About diverse but still common challenges shared by the countries of Southeast Europe, Turkey, Croatia, Montenegro and Albania

**Crisis frameworks**
About crisis perspectives from the point of view of the migration of refugees from Ukraine, challenges of asylum seekers in Serbia, migrant integration in Trieste (Italy) and racialisation of Polish essential workers in the UK

**Violence, post-conflict societies and migration**
About open and expansive citizenship in contested democratizations, internally displaced persons, temporary protection and former combatants

**Ambivalences in (ir)regularizing migrants**
About emigration from Serbia and Kosovo* and challenges of (re)integration and return
Critical narratives, discourses and representations of migrants

About nation, race and class in anti-migrant narratives, public narratives on migrants during the COVID-19, images on migrants in newspapers and discursive strategies regarding migration policies in the public spheres

Challenging “integration” – experiences of migrant children, youth and families

About trauma informed approaches to migrant families, experience of migrant youth in collective care, access of migrant children to schools and social protection of migrants

Policy panel

About support to migrants and challenges of it from the point of view of the UNHCR, UNICEF, Group 484 and the Red Cross, their bi-lateral and mutual cooperation and empowering of migrants in Serbia

The views and opinions expressed here are entirely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.

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