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SECURITY CHALLENGES OF
THE NEW WORLD

**THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN SECURITY AND
ITS IMPACT ON MIGRATION**

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The Concept of Human Security and Its Impact on Migration

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CONTENT

Arif Akgul & Hasan Aydin MANAGING RISKS OR PROTECTING PEOPLE? RETHINKING THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN MIGRATION GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN SECURITY	6
Emilia Alaverdov & Miranda Gurgenedze MECHANISMS FOR PROTECTING MIGRANTS' RIGHTS IN THE MODERN WORLD	20
Abdulkadir Usman THE IMPACT OF NOMADISM ON MIGRATION PATTERNS AND ASSOCIATED SECURITY DYNAMICS: A REVIEW OF THE NIGERIAN SITUATION (2020–2026)	29
Milivoje Pajović EU MILITARISATION VS. MIGRATION	38
Jelena Zvezdanović Lobanova, Mikhail Lobanov & Milan Zvezdanović GREEN TRANSITION AND MIGRATION DYNAMICS: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES	51
Slavica Stamenić Janjić THE PARADOX OF HUMAN SECURITY: THE LIMITS OF SOLIDARITY IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS □ MIGRATION POLICIES	64
Vesna Perić & Maja Vasiljević GENDER AND BORDER: TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECTS AND BODY IN EUROPEAN MIGRATION CINEMA	78
Vojkan Nikolić & Nikola Petrović INFORMATION SYSTEMS FOR MONITORING MIGRATION FLOWS AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS	82
Nenad Putnik & Dušan Smiljanić INTERSTATE CONFLICTS AS CAUSE OF MIGRATIONS	106
Marija Vukadinović IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND HUMAN SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCE STRATEGIES	119

Ljubića Matić	
THE INVISIBILITY BARGAIN ON STAGE: THE THEATER AS A NONSTATE SECURITY ACTOR	132
Abdulkadir Usman & Tanko Likita	
MODERN DIGITAL NOMADISM AS AN EMERGING INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION NICHE: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLICY REVIEW	147
Robert Ugochukwu Onyeneke, Frank Baffour-Ata, Jonathan Atta-Aidoo & Chinenye Judith Onyeneke	
HUMAN SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION DYNAMICS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A DYNAMIC PANEL ANALYSIS	160
Hossam Nabil Elshenraky	
GENDER ASPECTS OF MIGRATION AND CYBER-CRIME	179
Sandra Bočić	
THE WAR IN UKRAINE: MIGRATION AND HUMAN SECURITY CHALLENGES	198
Marijana Maksimović	
HUMAN SECURITY IN THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - TERM, CONCEPT AND PRACTICE	212
Galit M. Ben-Israel	
WELCOME BACK? "ISIS BRIDES" AND THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC DILEMMA IN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA	226

IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND HUMAN SECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

Abstract

This paper examines migration governance in the Western Balkans during the so-called Migration Crisis, focusing on the conceptual debate over whether the phenomenon should be understood as a migration/migrant crisis in itself or as a crisis of border management and institutional capacity. It argues that the dominant framing of large-scale mixed migration flows, particularly during the peak period of 2014–2016, reflects a securitized discourse that risks obscuring the governance and institutional dimensions of the phenomenon. This tendency was reinforced by the absence of a unified European Union response, which contributed to fragmented national approaches and uneven burden-sharing across the region. To address these challenges, the paper adopts a resilience perspective. In this sense, resilience is understood as the capacity of states and regional actors to align migration governance with human security principles. From this perspective, resilience encompasses both the ability to respond to migration pressures while safeguarding vulnerable populations and the capacity to promote institutional adaptation and regional cooperation in support of long-term human security. Finally, the paper argues that although the Western Balkans' role as a transit corridor was particularly pronounced during 2014–2016, future migration pressures and potential crises remain likely. Strengthening resilience therefore requires enhanced regional cooperation, improved institutional preparedness, and a more balanced integration of human security perspectives in migration governance.

Keywords: *Resilience, Security, Western Balkans, Regional Cooperation, Human Security Threats*

Introduction

International migration is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon shaped by a wide range of political, economic, social, and security factors, and it remains a central feature of contemporary global dynamics. While migration has long been subject to regulatory and political control, its systematic framing as a security threat became significantly more pronounced in the post-9/11 period, when migration, terrorism, and

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multi-stakeholder cooperation (UNHCR, 2016). These measures can be understood as efforts to strengthen resilience by enhancing the capacity of states, international organizations, and local communities to anticipate, absorb, and respond to future migration-related pressures. Therefore, resilience emerges not as the absence of vulnerability, but as the development of institutional and cooperative mechanisms capable of managing human security risks more effectively. The emphasis placed on partnership and coordination further reflects the recognition that migration is a transnational phenomenon with political, social, economic, and security implications that cannot be addressed by individual states alone, but require sustained regional and international cooperation. The establishment of coordinated frameworks such as the UNHCR and IOM Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (UNHCR & International Organization for Migration, 2016) reflects the increasing externalization and multi-level governance of migration management in Europe, although such coordination mechanisms have been criticized for operating within fragmented institutional structures and for placing significant pressure on already limited national capacities in transit regions such as the Western Balkans (Potitò, 2026).

Resilience, when viewed through a human security lens, is not limited to institutional robustness but also encompasses the capacity of governance systems to ensure the protection, dignity, and basic needs of affected populations, including migrants and refugees in situations of large-scale mobility. This dual dimension (institutional and normative) captures the core contribution of resilience to human security-oriented migration governance. Initiatives such as the Open Balkan can be understood as attempts to enhance regional coordination and reduce administrative barriers among participating states. Although not explicitly designed as a resilience strategy, such initiatives may nevertheless contribute to resilience-building by strengthening the institutional preconditions for collective action in migration governance.⁹ A similar logic of regional interdependence and coordinated governance can be observed in adjacent policy areas, such as ecological diplomacy and the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (Vukadinović, 2025), as well as in energy security and sustainability transitions, where regional cooperation is increasingly framed as a structural requirement for effective policy implementation (Vukadinović, 2026). However, the effectiveness of such initiatives remains contingent on sustained political alignment and consistent implementation across participating states.

⁹ Open Balkan is a regional initiative of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia aimed at facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people, and strengthening regional economic cooperation in line with EU integration processes (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy of North Macedonia, n.d.).

border control increasingly converged within security policy discourse (Tatalović & Malnar, 2016: 286-287). Such framings risk overlooking the complexity and diversity of migration dynamics, while shaping governance responses in ways that may privilege (national) security logics over broader human security considerations. In debates surrounding what has been referred to in recent academic literature as the "Migration Crisis" or "Migrant Crisis," concerns emerged within the European Union regarding the scale and management of incoming flows of asylum seekers and (ir)regular migrants, particularly in relation to the capacity of certain member states to accommodate potential long-term settlement (Ajzenhamer, 2018: 291). These perceptions contributed to a range of policy responses aimed at strengthening control over the EU's external borders, including intensified surveillance measures and, in some cases, the construction of physical barriers. Such developments unfolded within a broader structural tension between the Union's normative commitment to humanitarian principles and the increasing prioritization of internal security and societal stability, which also revealed differing national approaches to migration governance, as noted by Ajzenhamer (2018: 291). Taken together, these dynamics demonstrated how migration evolved into a significant issue within contemporary European geopolitical and security discourse.

The "Migration Crisis" or "Migrant Crisis" has often been framed as a situation in which human security and national security came into "conflict," with states facing the challenge of balancing humanitarian obligations and security concerns (Athanasίου, 2026). This paper starts from the assumption that such a conflict may be more apparent than real. Drawing on the concept of human security, it explores whether the protection of individuals and the pursuit of national security can be understood as mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives. This paper proceeds from the assumption that the "Migration Crisis" in the Western Balkans represents a relevant case for examining the interaction between human security considerations and state security responses. It analyzes human security threats and risks associated with the crisis during the peak period of 2014–2016 and explores how its aftermath may have contributed to processes of resilience-building in addressing future migration-related challenges. Additionally, it can be argued that the formulation "Migration Crisis" or "Migrant Crisis" reflects a stronger national security framing, in which migrants are more readily constructed as a security concern. In contrast, the term "border management crisis" may offer a more analytically neutral framing that shifts attention toward governance structures and institutional capacity, thereby allowing for a human security perspective in which migrants are treated as the primary referent object of protection.

The Western Balkans (route) is understood, in line with International Organization for Migration (IOM) usage, due to the spillover effects of the Mediterranean route, as comprising the post-Yugoslav republics excluding Slovenia and Croatia, while also including Albania (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2025). It is important,

however, to accentuate that although now widely used in academic and political contexts, the term “Western Balkans” is a relatively recent administrative and policy-oriented designation.² It distinguishes a subset of Balkan states within EU discourse, even though the region is more broadly and historically understood simply as part of the Balkans. While the Western Balkan region has historically experienced various forms of internal displacement and intra-regional migration during and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it had not previously been confronted with large-scale intercontinental migration flows of the type observed during 2014–2016 (Lilyanova, 2016: 1-6). This distinction is important, as the Western Balkans functioned primarily as a transit³ corridor rather than a destination region during the 2014–2016 crisis and understanding this role is essential for analyzing the governance, border management, and human security challenges generated by onward movement toward destination countries in the EU.

Migration/Migrant Crisis or Border Management Crisis?

It is necessary to critically assess whether the term “Migration Crisis” or “Migrant Crisis” can be regarded as an analytically neutral concept, or whether it instead represents a politically and normatively biased formulation used to describe the complex dynamics of human mobility over the past decade. The political aspect of this crisis, as examined in this paper, is based on the idea that the crisis initially emerged primarily as a humanitarian issue, with many political actors within the EU emphasizing solidarity and refugee protection, however, the subsequent closure of several EU borders and the introduction of restrictive migration policies revealed tensions and contradictions within the Union’s response (Komljenović, 2022). Although the scope of this paper does not allow for a comprehensive examination of this argument, securitization theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School (especially through the work of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde) offers a useful point of departure for analyzing the construction of migration as a security concern. To be precise, securitization theory argues that an issue does not become a security threat because it is objectively dangerous in an existential sense, rather, an issue becomes “securitized” through political and discursive processes (Buzan et al., 1998, as cited in Vukadinović, 2024: 40).

²see Vuletić D., (2018). *NATO i Zapadni Balkan*, Vojno delo 7/2018.

³ As noted by Tošić (2017: 150-160) during the peak of the 2015 migration flows the Western Balkans (particularly urban centers such as Belgrade) were commonly described by local actors, media, and policymakers in terms of “transit” and “movement,” with an emphasis on facilitating onward passage rather than long-term settlement. This framing was also reproduced in broader European discourse on the so-called “Balkan Route,” which predominantly conceptualized the region as a corridor rather than a destination space (Tošić, 2017).

Within securitization theory, threats are not understood as objective or self-evident phenomena, but as socially and politically constructed through discourse. Drawing on Austin's speech act theory, the Copenhagen School argues that language does not merely describe security threats but can actively constitute them (Austin 1975: 117; Macdonald, 2012: 119). Through specific "speech acts," political actors frame certain developments as existential threats requiring urgent and exceptional measures. In this sense, securitization occurs when an issue is successfully presented as a matter of security rather than ordinary politics. According to Wæver, a "speech act," whereby political actors such as governments, ministers, or EU institutions frame a particular issue as an existential threat, and if the audience "including the public, state institutions, and EU actors" accepts this framing, the issue is transformed from a matter of normal politics into one requiring extraordinary measures (Vukadinović, 2024). Scholars examining securitization have also emphasized the importance of framing processes in shaping perceptions of risk and urgency (Kouloglou, 2026: 2). Political leaders, institutions, and experts often rely on particular rhetorical strategies, terminology, and narratives to construct migration or other developments as security concerns and such discursive practices influence public perception by emphasizing danger, instability, or crisis, even where threats may be uncertain or difficult to define concretely (Kouloglou, 2026: 2). Consequently, the framing of threats becomes closely connected to questions of political authority, legitimacy, and the justification of specific policy responses.

Hence, this paper argues that the term "Migration Crisis" or "Migrant Crisis" reflects a securitized framing that has, from the outset, mischaracterized the nature of the events surrounding the large-scale movement of people into Europe. Rather than migrants themselves constituting a security threat, the crisis should be understood primarily as a crisis of border management and political coordination within the EU. The uneven and fragmented response of EU member states, together with the subsequent reintroduction of internal border controls, exposed structural weaknesses in the governance of the Schengen area and the Common European Asylum System (Vukadinović, 2024). Drawing on securitization theory and a human security perspective, this paper contends that migrants should not be conceptualized as sources of insecurity, but rather as referent objects of security. In many cases, they also became members of host societies in destination countries, further challenging exclusionary security narratives (Komljenović, 2020: 188). Accordingly, the events of 2014–2016 are more accurately understood as a border management and governance crisis than as a "migration crisis" per se. Given that the Western Balkan region functioned primarily as a transit corridor for migrants en route to more economically developed EU member states, this paper argues that future migration flows may increasingly transform these states from transit zones into (semi)permanent destinations. In such a scenario, migration would no longer be managed solely as a matter of border control and short-term mobility, but would also

raise longer-term challenges. Far from being a static phenomenon, the "Migration Crisis" or "Migrant Crisis" in this paper referred to as the border management crisis, can be seen as reshaping regional cooperation, state responses, and perceptions of stability within the Western Balkans and beyond the region.

From Securitization to Human Security: Migration Governance and Referent Objects of Security

The intellectual roots of the human security approach can be traced to the cosmopolitan philosophy of Immanuel Kant.⁴ According to Daniele Archibugi (1995), Kant's concept of cosmopolitan law was not merely a framework governing relations between states, but a legal and moral principle that extended certain rights beyond national borders. Archibugi argues that cosmopolitan law served two important functions: first, it required states to recognize basic rights that applied to individuals regardless of citizenship, and second, it created a basis for international society to intervene when fundamental rights were violated (Archibugi, 1995: 430). As Kant observed, humanity had entered a "universal community" in which violations of rights in one part of the world could be felt everywhere (Archibugi, 1995: 430). This emphasis on the protection of individuals rather than the exclusive protection of state sovereignty foreshadows the contemporary human security approach, which similarly identifies the individual as the primary referent object of security and focuses on safeguarding people from threats such as violence, poverty, and human rights abuses.

The relationship between securitization theory and human security can be productively understood through the concept of referent objects of security, referring to the entities whose survival, stability, or well-being is constructed as requiring protection and is thereby positioned as being under threat (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). As the author has previously mentioned, in securitization theory, security is not treated as an objective or material condition, but as a socially and politically constructed process. The border management crisis was transformed from a socio-economic or humanitarian phenomenon into a security issue, thereby justifying exceptional policy responses such as intensified border controls, emergency measures, and the externalization of migration management, with the referent object remaining predominantly state-centric, as the primary concern is the protection of political and territorial order from perceived external pressures. By contrast, the human security paradigm fundamentally reconfigures both the referent object and the meaning of security itself.

⁴ Whereas cosmopolitan approaches view individuals as the primary referent object of security, realist approaches maintain that the state remains the central object of security. Realists argue that the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity is a prerequisite for individual welfare, making state security logically prior to human security (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979).

Emerging prominently in the 1994 *UNDP Human Development Report 1994*, human security shifts the analytical focus from the state to the individual and community level outlining seven key components of human security: Economic security (income, employment), Food security (access to sufficient food), Health security (protection from disease and access to healthcare), Environmental security (protection from environmental degradation), Personal security (protection from physical violence), Community security (protection of cultural and social identity), Political security (protection of human rights and freedoms) (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Additionally, it defines security in terms of "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want," thereby expanding the scope of security to include protection from violence, deprivation, displacement, and structural vulnerability. Ergo, the individual becomes the primary referent object of security, and the central normative concern is the safeguarding of human dignity and basic needs rather than the preservation of state authority alone. This understanding is consistent with contemporary interpretations of human security, which emphasize that it does not displace the state but rather repositions it as one of several instruments for ensuring individual well-being, including within security sector contexts (Lewis-Simpson & Meharg, 2023).

The human security perspective is further reflected in contemporary migration governance frameworks that prioritize the protection and well-being of migrants as individuals rather than treating migration solely as a matter of border control. In this regard, the International Organization for Migration's Migration Governance Framework (MIGOF) and Migration Governance Indicators (MGI) provide a useful operationalization of human security principles in the migration context. The framework emphasizes the protection of migrant rights and access to humanitarian assistance, institutional preparedness and whole-of-government approaches to migration governance, as well as regional and international cooperation in crisis management (IOM, 2015: 2019). These dimensions correspond closely to the core assumptions of human security, particularly the protection of individuals from vulnerability, deprivation, and insecurity. Furthermore, by assessing states' capacities to respond to emergencies, coordinate migration policies, and maintain social and institutional resilience during crises, the MGI framework demonstrates that human security extends beyond immediate protection measures and encompasses the broader governance structures required to safeguard individual well-being in situations of large-scale human mobility.

This shift from state-centric to individual-centric security can also be observed in migration governance indicators such as Migrant integration policy index. MIPEX can be interpreted through a human security lens as an indicator of how far states translate formal commitments into the protection of individuals as the primary referent object of security. Serbia (50), Albania (43), and North Macedonia (42–43) are classified as "equality on paper," suggesting that while individual rights are formally recognized,

their implementation remains limited in practice (Migration Policy Group, 2019). Croatia's score of 44 (2023) reflects a similar pattern.⁵ These findings indicate that even in states primarily functioning as transit countries, migration governance still reflects uneven institutional capacity to secure individual well-being, reinforcing the gap between formal policy commitments and substantive human security outcomes.

The conceptual tension between securitization theory and human security therefore lies not in whether migration constitutes a form of (in)security, but in how (in)security is defined and whose security is prioritized. While securitization frameworks tend to privilege the protection of the state and its institutional order, human security frameworks prioritize the protection of individuals, particularly those in situations of heightened vulnerability such as refugees and migrants. This divergence has significant analytical implications, as it reveals that security is not a neutral category but a politically contested one shaped by competing normative assumptions about referent objects and appropriate responses to perceived threats.⁶ In the case of the Western Balkans during the 2014–2016 migration crisis, migration governance was characterized by the simultaneous operation of securitized and humanitarian rationalities. On the one hand, states engaged in border control practices and cooperation aimed at managing and regulating transnational mobility, reflecting a state-centric understanding of security (Greider, 2017). On the other hand, the scale and visibility of transit migration flows necessitated the implementation of humanitarian measures, including emergency accommodation, transit facilitation, and coordination with international organizations (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015). As a result, migrants were simultaneously constructed as objects of border governance and as subjects of humanitarian protection.

Building Resilience to Human Security Challenges in the Western Balkans

While the Western Balkans maintained a predominantly humanitarian approach during the peak migration period, this apparent success should be interpreted with cau-

⁵ Although Croatia is not part of the Western Balkans (route) and is not a primary focus of this study, its score is included for comparative reference. As an EU member state, Croatia nonetheless records the same score in 2023, suggesting formal equality in indicators despite differing contextual realities. It should also be noted that while the data for Western Balkan countries derive from 2019 reports, the Croatian data are based on 2023 sources.

⁶ The interpretation of the border management crisis depends on which referent object is placed at the centre of analysis. If the state is the referent object, migration appears primarily as a security challenge. If the individual (migrant) is the referent object, migration appears primarily as a human security issue requiring protection and assistance.

tion.⁷ The region's response was shaped by the fact that most migrants and refugees viewed the Western Balkans as a transit corridor rather than a final destination. Hence, national authorities were primarily confronted with the challenges of registration, temporary accommodation, humanitarian assistance, and border management, rather than the long-term social, economic, and political questions associated with integration and settlement (Sardelić, 2025: 79-84). This raises an important question regarding the sustainability and transferability of the region's response: whether the same level of commitment to human security principles could be maintained under circumstances in which Western Balkan states become destination countries rather than transit countries. The answer to this question remains open and warrants further scholarly attention, particularly in relation to demographic change, labour market needs, and evolving migration patterns across Europe (Nikolić & Maksimović, 2024: 65-83). These issues, however, lie beyond the scope of this paper. The present study focuses on resilience in the Western Balkans, using human security as its central analytical framework, while leaving broader structural questions for future research in the field.

The concept of resilience becomes central to understanding how states in the region adapt to shifting migration patterns. Specifically, rather than focusing exclusively on restrictive security measures, resilience highlights the ability of political, social, and institutional systems to absorb, adapt to, and recover from migration-related pressures (Labarre, Mandalenakis & Niculescu, 2025: 21-39). From a resilience perspective, human security is operationalized through the capacity of multi-level governance systems to protect civilians under conditions of systemic stress, requiring coordinated responses between states, international organizations, and local actors (Atkinson et al., 2022).⁸ Resilience is not only observable in the immediate "crisis" response but also in the longer-term institutional adjustments that followed the peak migration period. The border management crisis exposed significant deficiencies in the human, financial, material, and institutional capacities of states along the Western Balkan route (Subotić, 2024). In response, the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) identified key areas requiring improvement, including humanitarian protection, coordinated response mechanisms, and

⁷ It should be noted that the Western Balkans as a region cannot be analytically regarded as an unequivocally successful case of migration-crisis management, given the significant variation in national responses, capacities, and levels of regional coordination. Nevertheless, Serbia's response to the humanitarian and operational challenges of the 2014–2016 migration flows has been assessed positively, including by European institutions, particularly with regard to the treatment of migrants and refugees transiting through its territory. For a detailed discussion of regional cooperation and Serbia's role during the crisis, see Vukadinović (2024).

⁸ For the purposes of this paper, migrants are operationalized as the primary referent object of human security analysis, understood as civilians in situations of heightened vulnerability arising from forced or irregular mobility.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the conceptual framing of the "Migration/Migrant Crisis" in the Western Balkans is analytically significant, and that the formulation of a border management crisis provides a more appropriate lens for understanding the phenomenon. This framing shifts analytical attention away from the politicization of migration flows as a security threat and toward the institutional, governance, and capacity-related dimensions of border management. By contrast, securitized interpretations risk reinforcing a state-centred logic that obscures the structural and operational challenges faced by both the European Union and Western Balkan states during the peak period of 2014–2016. The analysis has further shown that fragmented policy responses and the absence of a coherent EU-wide approach contributed to uneven burden-sharing and reactive national strategies across the region. The paper highlights the need for more systematic and coordinated governance frameworks capable of addressing future migration pressures. Strengthening institutional preparedness and regional cooperation remains essential, particularly in light of the Western Balkans' continued geopolitical relevance as a (transit) space. The study contributes to ongoing debates on migration governance by demonstrating how different conceptual framings shape both policy responses and understandings of responsibility within European migration management. Rather than treating the Western Balkans as a uniform or fully coordinated regional actor, the analysis also acknowledges variation in national responses and institutional capacities, as well as the fact that migration governance was shaped by the region's position as a transit corridor toward European Union destination states. This positionality is crucial for understanding both the scope and the limits of adaptive capacity (resilience) during the crisis period. In line with securitization theory, migration itself is not inherently a security threat; rather, it becomes treated as a security threat when political actors frame it as one through political and discursive processes. From a resilience perspective, the significance of the 2014–2016 migration crisis lies not only in the challenges it generated but also in the lessons it provided for future crisis management.

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