

Intersecting Crises: The Role of Environmental Pressures in Shaping Migration and Security in the Balkans

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Abstract

The Balkan region stands at the intersection of multiple crises, where environmental pressures increasingly influence patterns of human mobility and reshape the security landscape. This paper examines the migration - environment - nexus in the Western Balkans, analyzing how climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, agricultural decline, and urban pollution act as drivers of both internal and cross-border migration. The study highlights the vulnerability of rural communities facing declining agricultural productivity and the growing urban populations exposed to pollution and infrastructural stress. It also explores the security implications of environmentally induced migration, including resource competition, social instability, and the risk of conflict over shared natural assets such as water and arable land. Drawing on recent empirical studies and policy analyses, the paper argues that effective responses require integrated regional strategies that enhance resilience, promote sustainable resource management, and address the root causes of environmental degradation and forced mobility. The findings underscore the necessity of viewing migration not only as a consequence of environmental stress, but also as a critical variable in shaping future security and development in the Balkans.

Key Words: *Migration – Environment Nexus, Environmental Security, Human Mobility, Urban Vulnerability, Resource Conflict.*

1. Introduction

Contextualizing the Balkan Crises and the Migration–Environment–Security Nexus

The Western Balkans, a region encompassing Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, has long been characterized by a combination of socio-political fragility, economic volatility, and unresolved historical grievances. The dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s left behind a complex legacy of ethnic fragmentation, weak institutions, border disputes, and fragile peace processes. Although these countries have made progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration, they continue to grapple with high youth unemployment, governance deficits, depopulation, and uneven development trajectories.

Amid these structural challenges, the region now faces an intensifying set of environmental threats. Climate change is accelerating hydrological imbalances, increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events—such as floods, droughts, and wildfires - and degrading ecosystems and agricultural productivity. The World Bank reports that Western Balkan countries are highly vulnerable to climate-induced shocks, with projected GDP losses of up to 15% in high-impact scenarios by 2050 if adaptation is not prioritized. Rural areas - especially in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia - are witnessing severe soil erosion, water scarcity, and reduced crop yields, while urban centers like Skopje, Tirana, and Belgrade suffer from chronic air pollution, poor waste management, and overstretched infrastructure.

These environmental dynamics are closely linked to patterns of migration. Across the region, environmental degradation acts as a “threat multiplier,” exacerbating existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and triggering both internal displacement and cross-border emigration. For example, prolonged droughts and floods have led to increased rural-to-urban migration, particularly among young men and women seeking economic opportunities in larger cities or abroad. Simultaneously, the Western Balkans serve as a transit corridor for irregular migration from Asia and Africa toward the European Union-placing additional pressure on under-resourced state institutions.

This convergence of climate stress, population movement, and institutional fragility constitutes what is increasingly referred to as the migration-environment-security nexus. The term describes how environmental pressures can drive human mobility, and how such mobility, in turn, can reshape security landscapes-especially when state capacity to manage the consequences is limited or contested. In the Balkans, this nexus is becoming visible in multiple forms: competition over land and water resources, urban overcrowding, increased demand for public services, and rising public dissatisfaction with governance responses. These dynamics can spark intergroup tensions, weaken democratic legitimacy, and in extreme cases, escalate into localized conflict or cross-border instability.

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2. Thematic and Analytical Framing

Identify and classify the main environmental pressures currently affecting the Western Balkan region

This objective aims to provide a comprehensive mapping of the key environmental challenges shaping the region’s socio-ecological landscape. This includes:

- Climate change manifestations, such as rising temperatures, irregular precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events (floods, droughts, wildfires).
- Biodiversity loss and deforestation, especially in mountain and riverine ecosystems.

- Land degradation and soil erosion in agricultural zones, particularly in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia.
- Urban environmental stressors, such as poor air quality, water pollution, and waste management failures in cities like Tirana, Skopje, and Belgrade.

This classification forms the empirical basis for linking environmental stress to migration patterns and governance risks.

Examine how these environmental factors act as direct or indirect drivers of both internal and cross-border migration

This objective explores how deteriorating environmental conditions affect people's decisions to move, focusing on:

- Internal migration, especially rural depopulation and displacement toward major cities due to unproductive agriculture or disaster events.
- Cross-border migration, including Albania's persistent emigration toward Italy, Germany, and the UK, often fueled by livelihood insecurity.
- Transit migration, where Albania and other Balkan states serve as passage zones for migrants from Asia and Africa toward the EU.

This objective treats environmental factors as both push factors and contextual enablers of broader migratory pressures.

Analyze the security implications of environmentally induced migration

Environmental displacement and mobility often strain the receiving environments, institutions, and social fabrics. This objective investigates:

- Urban fragility, stemming from rapid demographic influxes and inadequate service provision.
- Resource conflict potential, particularly around access to water, arable land, and public infrastructure.
- Erosion of trust in public institutions, as governments struggle to respond to simultaneous climate, development, and migration crises.
- Risk of political instability, particularly in ethnically sensitive or economically marginalized areas.

This links environmental security theory to real-world vulnerabilities in the Balkan context.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper draws on an interdisciplinary framework that integrates concepts from environmental security, climate - induced migration, and urban vulnerability to analyze the intersecting crises affecting the Western Balkans. These concepts offer a multi-scalar lens to understand how environmental degradation translates into socio-political instability through the channel of human mobility.

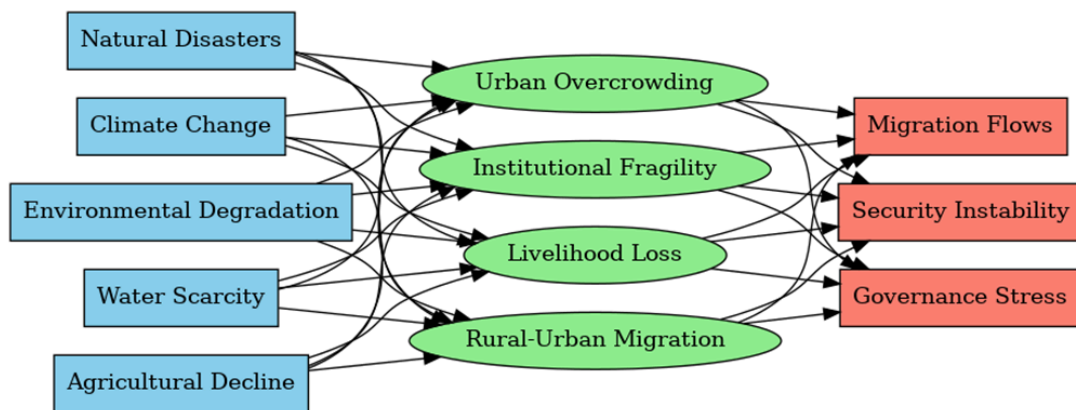
Environmental security refers to the notion that ecological degradation, resource scarcity, and environmental disasters can become significant threats to political stability and social order. It expands traditional security studies beyond state-centric or military concerns by emphasizing how environmental stress can destabilize governance, exacerbate inequality, and trigger both violent and non-violent conflict . In the Western Balkans, environmental security is particularly relevant due to the region's dependence on natural resources, high exposure to climate risks, and limited institutional resilience.

Climate migration refers to the movement of individuals or communities influenced - directly or indirectly - by environmental and climate-related changes such as droughts,

floods, desertification, or sea-level rise. While such migration may be voluntary, it often occurs in contexts where livelihoods collapse or survival is threatened. In the Balkans, this migration is typically rural-to-urban, but also includes cross-border migration prompted by degraded agricultural capacity or disaster displacement. The concept challenges binary views of migration as either economic or political by highlighting multi-causal, overlapping stressors.

Urban vulnerability is defined as the susceptibility of urban populations and infrastructures to environmental hazards, socio-economic inequality, and governance failure. Rapid and unplanned urbanization - common across cities like Tirana, Skopje, and Sarajevo - has led to housing shortages, inadequate sanitation, pollution, and infrastructural overload. These vulnerabilities are amplified by internal migration flows, especially when municipalities lack the capacity to provide services or enforce environmental protections. Understanding urban vulnerability is crucial to analyzing the downstream impacts of environmental pressures on social cohesion and stability.

Figure 1. Sankey Migration – Environment – Security - Nexus



4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, policy-oriented approach, combining empirical data, secondary literature, and visual analytical tools to examine the migration - environment - security nexus in the Western Balkans.

The analysis is based on:

- International datasets and reports: World Bank Climate and Development Reports (2022), UNEP (2021), UNDP (2020), and IOM (2022).
- Policy documents: EU Enlargement Progress Reports, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, and national environmental strategies.
- Scholarly literature: peer-reviewed articles on climate security, environmental migration, and Balkan governance.
- Case studies: drawn from Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on environmental stressors and displacement trends.

A central feature of this study is the use of a Sankey-style flow diagram that visually maps the causal relationships between environmental drivers, intermediary socio-institutional pathways (e.g., livelihood loss, institutional fragility), and dependent outcomes (e.g., migration flows, governance stress, conflict). This model helps synthesize diverse data streams and illustrate feedback loops across environmental and social systems.

Additionally, a case study matrix and a variable – impact heat map are used to demonstrate country-level variations and perceived strength of influence between factors. These visual tools enhance analytical clarity and support comparative discussion across national contexts.

5. Environmental Pressures in the Balkans

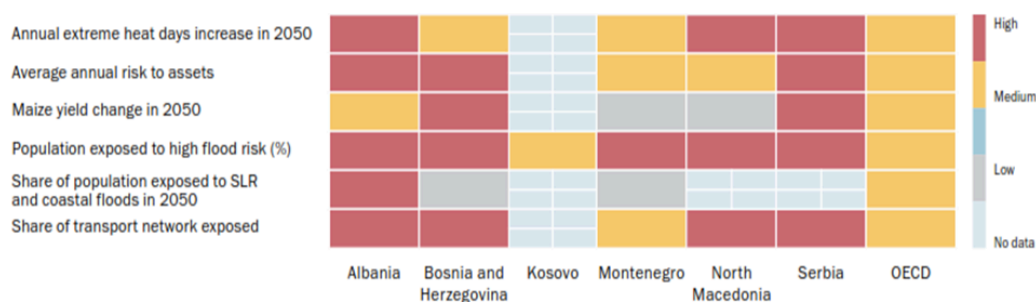
Environmental degradation in the Western Balkans is increasingly recognized as a systemic threat to the region’s socio-economic development, ecological stability, and human security. This section outlines the most pressing environmental challenges - ranging from climate impacts on agriculture to urban pollution - through a regional lens, supported by country-level observations.

5.1. Climate Change and Agricultural Decline

Climate change has become one of the most pervasive stressors on rural economies in the Balkans. Increasing average temperatures, irregular precipitation patterns, and intensifying droughts have severely affected agricultural productivity in countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. According to the World Bank, Western Balkan nations face a 10–15% potential reduction in agricultural output by 2050 without climate adaptation measures.

These changes are especially destructive in rural mountainous areas, where small-scale farming remains a major livelihood. Crop failures, livestock disease, and declining soil fertility are pushing farmers toward either subsistence models or migration. Seasonal labor migration, often informal and unregulated, has increased significantly in these zones. This environmentally driven rural outmigration contributes to demographic decline and economic stagnation in remote areas, undermining long-term rural development goals.

Figure 2. Climate change and vulnerability in Balkan Countries compared to EU and OECD Countries.



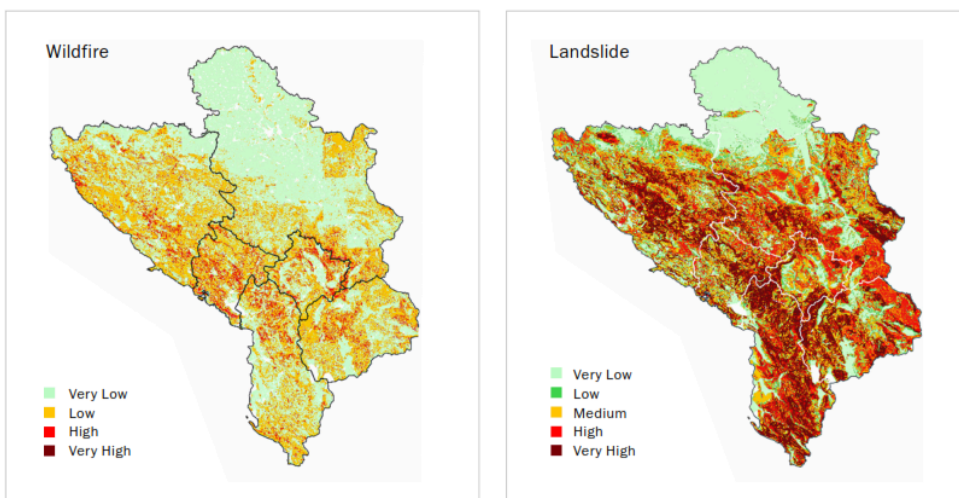
Source: World Bank Climate Change Group.

5.2. Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss

The Western Balkans host some of Europe's most diverse ecosystems, particularly along the Dinaric Alps, Vjosa River Basin, and Sharr Mountains. However, rapid deforestation - often illegal or unregulated - is placing severe pressure on biodiversity and contributing to land degradation, increased flood risks, and habitat fragmentation. In Albania and Kosovo, deforestation is driven by a combination of timber extraction, hydropower expansion, and agricultural encroachment.

Biodiversity loss threatens not only ecological balance but also rural economies dependent on forest-based resources and eco-tourism. Protected areas exist, but enforcement is often weak, and cross-border cooperation on conservation remains underdeveloped. This loss of biodiversity not only has environmental implications but also socio-political consequences, as competition for remaining resources can escalate into conflict at the local level.

Figure 3. High Wildfire and Landslide Risks In Cross-Border regions, Mountains Regions



Source: World Bank Analysis (CIMA data) and European Land Susceptibility (ELSUSV2)

5.3. Water Scarcity and Shared Resources

Water stress is a growing concern in the region, particularly as river systems such as the Drin, Vjosa, Morava, and Sava basins face pressure from hydropower projects, industrial use, and agricultural demand. Transboundary water bodies are frequently contested, and cooperation between riparian states remains fragile and under-institutionalized³.

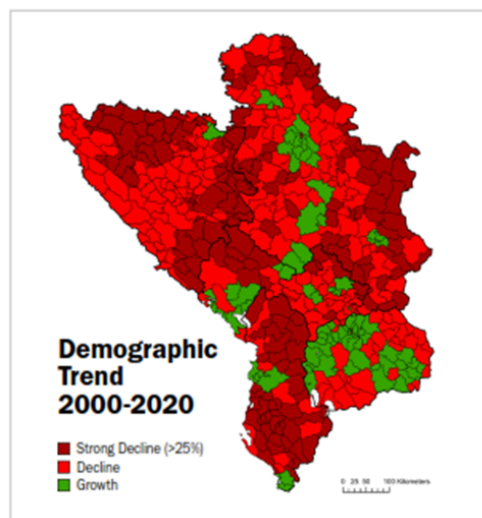
North Macedonia and Kosovo, for instance, face acute water shortages in the summer months, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina deal with periodic flooding that damages infrastructure and displaces populations. In both cases, poorly maintained water infrastructure and lack of integrated river basin management compound the problem. The shared nature of water resources in the Balkans makes this issue not just ecological, but geopolitical - posing risks for regional diplomacy and environmental peacebuilding.

5.4. Urban Pollution and Infrastructural Stress

Rapid and poorly planned urbanization has transformed many Balkan cities into environmental hotspots. High levels of air pollution, inadequate waste management, and failing public infrastructure are particularly evident in Skopje, Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Tirana.

Air quality often exceeds EU-accepted limits for particulate matter, contributing to rising respiratory diseases, especially among children and the elderly. Wastewater treatment and solid waste disposal remain inconsistent or absent in many municipalities. Moreover, urban sprawl - fueled by internal migration from rural areas - has led to informal settlements, construction without permits, and unregulated expansion into flood-prone areas. These pressures not only degrade the urban environment but also undermine social stability, increasing the risk of discontent and eroding trust in local governance.

Figure 4. Demographic Trend

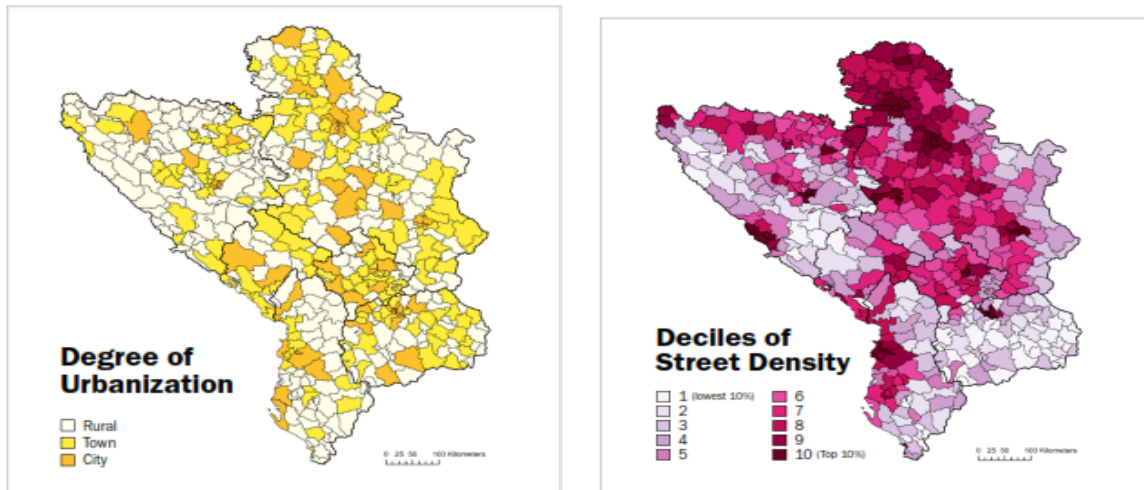


Source: World Bank Analysis (CIMA data) and European Land Susceptibility (ELSUSV2)

5.5. Internal Migration Trends

Internal migration in the Western Balkans is primarily characterized by a persistent and growing rural-to-urban movement, driven by structural economic inequalities, inadequate rural services, and increasingly by environmental stressors. These movements are reshaping the demographic and socio-political landscapes of both sending and receiving areas.

Figure 5. Degree of Urbanization and Street Density



Source: World Bank Analysis (CIMA data) and European Land Susceptibility (ELSV2)

In many parts of Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, rural communities face deepening hardship due to:

- Declining agricultural viability as a result of soil erosion, irregular rainfall, and increasing temperatures ;
- Diminished local employment opportunities, exacerbated by youth outmigration and aging populations;
- Inadequate infrastructure, including poor road access, unreliable electricity, limited internet connectivity, and weak public services;
- These structural deficiencies are amplified by environmental changes—particularly droughts and land degradation—that reduce the economic value of traditional livelihoods, leading many to abandon rural areas altogether;
- Urban centers such as Tirana, Skopje, Belgrade, and Sarajevo have become magnets for internal migrants seeking education, health services, and wage employment. However, the rapid pace of this influx has outstripped urban planning and service capacity;
- Informal settlements have proliferated in peri-urban areas, often built on flood-prone land or in ecologically sensitive zones;
- Basic services such as housing, waste disposal, water supply, and transportation are under growing pressure;
- Air and noise pollution levels have risen, alongside public dissatisfaction with municipal governance;
- In Tirana, for instance, the population has increased by over 30% since 2000, with much of that growth attributed to internal displacement from environmentally and economically vulnerable areas in northern and southeastern Albania .

- Internal migration is contributing to a dual demographic crisis:
- Rural depopulation undermines agricultural productivity, local traditions, and regional cohesion;
- Urban overconcentration fuels informal economies, precarious labor, and public unrest - particularly among unemployed youth;

These shifts have long-term implications for national planning, social protection systems, and political stability.

Additionally, there is an emerging concern about the environmental footprint of expanding urban populations, especially when sustainability frameworks are lacking.

5.6. Cross-border Migration and Climate Displacement

While internal migration dominates the mobility landscape of the Western Balkans, cross-border migration - both toward the EU and within the region - has gained prominence, particularly under the growing influence of environmental stressors. Increasingly, climate-related pressures such as declining agricultural productivity, extreme weather events, and ecosystem degradation act as indirect drivers of international migration.

Many households in Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina rely on migration as a long-term adaptation strategy to both economic hardship and environmental decline. Though environmental conditions are not always explicitly cited as the primary cause, they compound vulnerabilities that push individuals to seek opportunities abroad:

- Crop failures, irrigation challenges, and soil degradation reduce rural incomes, driving younger populations to emigrate;
- Lack of climate resilience in agriculture and public infrastructure contributes to a feeling of abandonment in peripheral regions;
- Remittance dependency shapes household-level decisions to migrate despite increasing legal and financial barriers to entry in the EU.

Recent surveys by the IOM and Balkan Barometer (2022) suggest that a notable portion of those planning to migrate cite environmental degradation as a worsening factor in their quality of life .

The Western Balkans also serve as a transit corridor for migrants from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia are key transit states along the so-called Western Balkan Route into the European Union. Environmental factors in origin countries -including prolonged droughts, desertification, and climate-linked conflicts - are major drivers of displacement .

However, transit migration is increasingly entangled with border securitization and pushback practices, leading to humanitarian challenges. While local populations are generally not the direct targets of these restrictions, the governance response to these movements influences national debates on sovereignty, migration control, and EU integration.

The absence of legal recognition for climate-induced migrants at both national and international levels leaves a growing number of displaced persons in a legal grey zone. Western Balkan countries lack formal mechanisms for identifying or protecting environmentally displaced persons, and this hinders both preparedness and accountability. Despite references to environmental risks in policy documents, few countries in the region have translated these concerns into migration governance frameworks. This gap leaves climate-displaced populations - whether internal or cross-border - without targeted protection or reintegration programs.

5.7. Albania's Role in Regional Flows

Albania occupies a pivotal position in the migration dynamics of the Western Balkans, functioning both as a country of origin and a key transit point in regional mobility patterns. Its geographic location along the Adriatic coast and proximity to EU member states such as Greece and Italy places it at the intersection of cross-border flows influenced by socio-economic, political, and increasingly, environmental factors.

Albania has a long history of emigration, with large segments of its population moving to Western Europe in search of economic stability. However, climate variability - such as more frequent droughts, land degradation, and coastal erosion - has intensified pressures on rural and peri-urban communities, indirectly reinforcing these migration trends.

In recent years, the rural exodus has escalated, with entire villages depopulated due to the compounded effects of environmental decline and weak economic diversification.

As a transit country, Albania has also played an increasingly visible role in the Western Balkan migration route. The country saw a notable rise in irregular border crossings and asylum applications during and after the 2015 migration crisis.

While many transiting individuals originate from outside the region, the country's limited infrastructure and institutional preparedness have revealed its vulnerabilities in managing large-scale human flows.

In response, Albania has entered into bilateral and multilateral agreements with the European Union and neighboring countries to strengthen border security and enhance migration governance. However, these security-focused measures often lack environmental sensitivity and fail to integrate climate considerations into long-term policy planning.

Albania's unique position - as both a sender and a channel for migrants - underscores its strategic importance in regional discussions on mobility and resilience. With increasing environmental risks, the country faces the dual challenge of addressing domestic climate-induced migration while adapting its institutions to regional and global migration pressures.

6. Security Implications

The rapid urbanization in the Western Balkans, driven in part by environmentally induced rural migration, has led to mounting pressures on urban infrastructure, governance, and social cohesion. Cities like Tirana, Skopje, and Belgrade have experienced accelerated population growth without commensurate improvements in public services, urban planning, or environmental management.

One of the most pressing consequences of this unchecked growth is the emergence of urban fragility. Informal settlements have expanded along city peripheries, often in

ecologically vulnerable areas prone to flooding, landslides, or air and water pollution. These settlements lack adequate housing, sanitation, healthcare, and education facilities, creating conditions that exacerbate poverty, marginalization, and intergroup tensions.

As urban resources become increasingly strained, perceptions of inequality rise, especially among newly arrived migrants competing with longer-term urban residents for jobs, housing, and basic services. This competition can spark resentment, particularly in areas with high youth unemployment or weak institutional trust.

Civil unrest in response to water shortages, electricity outages, or evictions from informal housing has become more frequent, with local governments often struggling to maintain order while respecting human rights. Urban fragility also presents broader security implications. Localized tensions have the potential to escalate into wider instability, especially when exacerbated by ethnic, political, or economic grievances.

In the absence of coordinated planning and inclusive governance, environmentally driven urban migration may thus trigger long-term fragmentation in urban societies, eroding public trust and governance legitimacy.

To mitigate these risks, a multi-layered approach is needed - one that incorporates climate adaptation, participatory urban planning, and strengthened local institutions. Recognizing the intersection between environmental pressure, migration, and social stability is key to preventing fragile urban contexts from becoming sources of insecurity.

6.1. Conflict Risks Over Natural Resources

Environmental degradation in the Western Balkans is intensifying competition over vital natural resources, including water, fertile land, and forests. As climate change accelerates, the region faces increasingly severe droughts, declining river levels, and disrupted hydrological cycles, placing strain on both rural livelihoods and cross-border resource management.

Water scarcity is emerging as a key source of tension. Transboundary rivers such as the Drin, Vardar, and Morava are shared by multiple Balkan countries, yet institutional mechanisms for their joint governance remain weak.

Competing national interests—exacerbated by hydropower projects, irrigation demands, and pollution—risk turning water into a geopolitical fault line, especially in the absence of trust and cooperation frameworks.

Access to fertile land is also a flashpoint, particularly in regions where land degradation, illegal logging, and urban sprawl intersect with economic precarity.

Smallholder farmers, pastoral communities, and displaced populations often compete over diminishing agricultural zones, leading to localized disputes that can escalate into broader social or ethnic conflicts.

The fragmentation of ecosystems has also contributed to resource competition. Unregulated tourism, extractive industries, and poorly planned infrastructure projects degrade shared natural assets and provoke contestation over land use, especially in areas designated as protected zones or community commons.

In Kosovo and northern Albania, disputes over communal forest use have at times escalated into violence. Without robust environmental governance and participatory land-use planning, these pressures may undermine social cohesion, especially in multi-ethnic and economically disadvantaged areas.

6.2. Institutional Vulnerabilities

Institutional capacity across the Western Balkans remains uneven and often inadequate to address the complex interlinkages between environmental degradation, migration, and security. Weak governance structures, limited inter-agency coordination, and under-resourced local administrations contribute to institutional fragility at a time when adaptive governance is increasingly vital.

A major challenge lies in the fragmentation of policy frameworks. Environmental, migration, and security policies are often developed in silos, with insufficient integration or strategic coherence. This disjointed approach hampers the ability of governments to respond holistically to the drivers and consequences of climate-induced migration.

For example, national adaptation plans rarely include provisions for human mobility, while migration strategies seldom incorporate climate risk assessments. Local governments—at the front lines of rural depopulation and urban overstretch—face considerable constraints in capacity and funding.

Municipalities struggle to deliver basic services, manage informal settlements, or develop sustainable land-use strategies, especially when donor support is temporary or fragmented. The reliance on short-term projects, rather than structural reforms, further undermines resilience.

Corruption and political instability also erode institutional legitimacy. In several countries, politicized management of natural resources and poor enforcement of environmental regulations have deepened public distrust. This weakens the social contract and reduces citizen engagement in climate adaptation or governance reforms.

Building institutional resilience requires a dual strategy: (1) strengthening horizontal and vertical policy coordination among environmental, migration, and security actors, and (2) investing in local capacity building, data systems, and participatory governance. International cooperation and EU integration processes can provide important leverage to incentivize reforms and align institutional responses with sustainability goals.

7. Conclusions

This study has provided a multidimensional exploration of how environmental pressures intersect with patterns of human mobility and security dynamics in the Western Balkans. The migration-environment-security nexus, as presented in this paper, is not a linear relationship but a complex, adaptive system influenced by ecological degradation, institutional capacity, socio-economic inequalities, and geopolitical tensions. By situating the Balkans within this broader theoretical and empirical framework, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the need for holistic responses to overlapping crises.

Environmental stressors—ranging from climate change and water scarcity to deforestation, biodiversity collapse, and urban pollution—are not isolated incidents. Instead, they manifest through cascading effects that displace rural populations, strain urban infrastructure, and increase the likelihood of inter-group tensions and cross-border conflict. These pressures are further magnified in fragile contexts, where governance structures are fragmented and socio-political trust is low. The case of Albania illustrates these dynamics particularly well, as the country simultaneously experiences internal displacement, rural depopulation, and external transit flows.

This paper underscores that conventional migration management and environmental policy responses are insufficient unless they are integrated within broader resilience-building strategies. A shift is needed: from reactive, short-term interventions to proactive, systemic governance models that combine environmental sustainability, human rights, and conflict prevention. Strengthening institutional coherence - both vertically across levels of governance and horizontally across sectors - is fundamental to achieving this shift.

Moreover, addressing the migration-environment nexus in the Balkans requires rethinking the regional architecture of cooperation. Existing transboundary mechanisms for water management, land conservation, and disaster risk reduction remain underdeveloped or politically contested. EU accession processes and regional partnerships (e.g., Berlin Process) offer a platform for reform but must be reoriented to prioritize climate security and environmental justice. Without collective accountability, shared natural resources may become a source of rivalry rather than integration.

This work also encourages scholars and policymakers to see environmental migration as a potential driver of innovation. If adequately supported, migrants can become agents of adaptation - revitalizing degraded territories, rebuilding urban peripheries, and contributing to green economies. Recognizing and enabling this potential will require a profound paradigm shift: one that reframes migration as a strategic component of climate resilience, rather than as a threat to national security.

In conclusion, the challenges posed by climate change and migration in the Balkans are not insurmountable. They require a concerted, interdisciplinary, and future-oriented response that bridges science, policy, and community needs. Only by embracing complexity and investing in long-term resilience can the region move from crisis management to sustainable development and stability.

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