

RETHINKING MIGRATION POLICY: ALIGNING WESTERN BALKAN AND EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIES WITH PAKISTANI MIGRATION DYNAMICS

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Abstract

Pakistan, with a population of 247 million and a land area of 881,640 km², faces persistent structural socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment, unequal land distribution, and the absence of a national digital employment registry. These factors contribute to growing irregular migration to Europe, particularly via the Western Balkan route. This study examines the structural drivers of Pakistani migration to Europe and evaluates the effectiveness of European Union (EU) and Western Balkan migration policies through a policy-oriented qualitative analysis of secondary sources from 2020 to 2025. Findings indicate that 42,956 Pakistani irregular migrants were detected on the Western Balkan route during this period, while asylum recognition rates remained low (12–14%). Existing readmission agreements have proven insufficient, focusing on returns without addressing underlying structural drivers. Underutilized land resources and weak labor market governance in Pakistan reinforce migration pressures, while EU migration policies remain predominantly security-oriented and poorly aligned with labor demand. The study advocates for a coordinated framework combining digital labor registries, land reform, structured legal migration pathways, and active participation of Western Balkan states. Aligning domestic reforms in Pakistan with European labor needs could foster sustainable, ethical, and mutually beneficial migration governance.

Keywords: irregular migration; Western Balkan route; Pakistan–European Union migration policy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the migration of Pakistani nationals to Europe, particularly through irregular channels, has attracted increasing attention from policymakers and migration scholars. Between 2020 and 2025, the number of Pakistani nationals attempting to reach the European Union via the Western Balkan route increased significantly. This study explores the structural drivers of such irregular migration and evaluates the effectiveness of EU and Western Balkan migration policies using a policy-oriented qualitative analysis of secondary sources from 2020–2025.

Migration pressure from Pakistan is largely driven by structural push factors, including unequal land ownership, high unemployment, and the absence of a real-time digital employment registry. Pakistan's population of 247.5 million resides on 881,640 km² of land, yet land resources are underutilized due to severe inequality: 2% of landowners control 45% of farmland, while 98% of households share the remaining 55% (Khan & Borisova, 2024). The lack of formal land use planning has also contributed to urban sprawl, reducing arable land for productive agriculture and job creation.

Annual employment generation in Pakistan is insufficient to meet demand. The Planning Commission estimates a need for 1.5 million new jobs annually, though actual requirements are likely higher due to unregistered labor (Khan, 2024). In the absence of a national digital registry of unemployed individuals, policymakers cannot implement targeted employment programs, leaving many potential workers vulnerable to exploitation by smuggling networks. Engineer Kamran Khan (2024) proposed a real-time, age-friendly digital employment registry at an international conference in Russia as a tool to address this gap.

The combination of structural unemployment, land underutilization, and the absence of formal tracking mechanisms has contributed to the rise of irregular migration. Pakistani nationals often pay over 3 million PKR to human smugglers for a perilous journey through the Western Balkans, which includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, before reaching EU destinations such as Italy, Germany, and France.

Despite multiple readmission agreements between the EU and Pakistan, these have largely failed to reduce irregular migration, as they focus on returns rather than addressing root causes or facilitating reintegration (Koser, 2022). Simultaneously, the EU faces labor shortages in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and eldercare (OECD, 2024). Current EU migration policies are security-focused, emphasizing border control rather than strategic cooperation with labor-exporting countries like Pakistan.

This paper addresses the following central research question: “How can the European Union and Western Balkan countries reshape migration policies to reduce irregular migration from Pakistan while aligning labor needs with Pakistan’s human resource potential?” Secondary contextual factors, including land reform, remittance flows, and employment digitalization, are examined to understand their contribution to migration dynamics.

By integrating policy-oriented qualitative analysis with secondary data from international organizations, this study provides actionable insights for a collaborative migration framework that aligns EU labor demand with Pakistan’s domestic reforms, emphasizing sustainable employment, ethical migration pathways, and strategic inclusion of Western Balkan states.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration is commonly analysed through the push-pull framework, which examines the interaction between socio-economic pressures in sending countries and perceived opportunities in receiving countries (Lee, 1966). Push factors in the context of Pakistan include high unemployment, unequal land distribution, limited access to formal employment, low social mobility, and absence of digital labor tracking mechanisms (Khan & Borisova, 2024; Khan, 2024). These conditions reduce local economic opportunities, incentivizing individuals to seek alternative livelihoods abroad. Pull factors in Europe include labor shortages in specific sectors such as agriculture, construction, healthcare, and eldercare, higher wages, social security systems, and established Pakistani diaspora networks, which provide social capital, information, and support for incoming migrants (IOM, 2024; Eurostat, 2025).

Beyond the classical push-pull paradigm, contemporary migration scholarship emphasizes that migration is influenced by structural governance failures, demographic pressures, and geopolitical factors. Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014) argue that migration is not merely a response to individual economic incentives but is increasingly shaped by institutional weaknesses in sending countries, such as insufficient labor market regulation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited social protection. For Pakistan, the high concentration of land ownership, coupled with underutilization of agricultural resources, creates persistent structural inequalities that exacerbate migration pressures.

Furthermore, demographic imbalances—a rapidly growing young population with insufficient employment opportunities—amplify the intensity of migration flows. Regional geopolitical factors, including instability in neighboring countries, evolving EU migration policies, and border management strategies in the Western Balkans, interact with these structural dynamics, influencing both the scale and routes of migration (Triandafyllidou, 2021; UNHCR, 2024).

Irregular migration via the Western Balkan corridor exemplifies how these combined push and pull forces operate in practice. Porous borders, limited institutional capacity in transit states, and the existence of smuggling networks create pathways that circumvent formal migration channels, allowing structural drivers in Pakistan to manifest in sustained irregular flows (Benedek et al., 2023; Koser, 2022).

Finally, migration theory increasingly incorporates the concept of migration as a development process, highlighting that migration can be both a response to structural deficits and a potential driver of economic and social change in sending countries. For Pakistan, this implies that policy interventions targeting employment, land reform, and labor market digitalization could modulate the push factors, while coordinated EU migration strategies could optimize the pull dynamics, thereby fostering more ethical and sustainable migration frameworks (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014; Khan, 2024).

2.1. Pakistani Migration Trends (2020–2025)

Between 2020 and 2025, Pakistani migration to Europe exhibited both regular and irregular patterns, with a particularly notable increase in irregular crossings via the Western Balkan route. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), this surge was driven primarily by the combination of limited legal migration channels in Europe and high demand for low-skilled labor, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, healthcare, and eldercare. The scarcity of legal opportunities encouraged many Pakistani nationals to resort to informal networks and human smuggling operations, despite the significant financial costs and physical risks involved.

Eurostat (2025) reports that during this period, only 12–14% of Pakistani asylum applicants in the EU were granted protection, leaving the vast majority of applicants in irregular status. This low acceptance rate indicates that the majority of Pakistani migrants entering Europe via the Western Balkan corridor were not primarily fleeing conflict or persecution, but rather responding to structural socio-economic pressures in Pakistan, including unemployment, limited access to land, and absence of formal employment tracking.

Irregular migration patterns also shifted in response to geopolitical and enforcement dynamics. Enhanced border security in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes, combined with more porous borders and less stringent asylum procedures in Western Balkan countries such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania, created preferential pathways for irregular movement. These routes often involve prolonged stays in informal transit camps, where migrants face limited access to protection, inadequate basic services, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation (UNHCR, 2024; Benedek et al., 2023).

Additionally, migration trends were shaped by transnational networks and diaspora communities in EU countries. Established Pakistani communities in Italy, Germany, and France provided social capital, employment information, and logistical support, further reinforcing the pull factors of labor demand and perceived better living standards (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014). These networks also facilitate circular and secondary migration, enabling migrants initially arriving in one country to move onward to other EU states where labor or social conditions are perceived as more favorable.

The interaction between push factors in Pakistan—including structural unemployment, land inequality, and unregulated labor markets—and pull factors in Europe, such as labor shortages and supportive diaspora networks, illustrates that migration during this period cannot be understood solely as a product of individual choice or opportunism. Instead, it reflects broader structural, policy, and governance dynamics operating at the national, regional, and transnational levels. These trends highlight the urgent need for coordinated policy responses, encompassing legal migration channels,

domestic labor market reforms in Pakistan, and enhanced institutional capacity in transit states along the Western Balkan corridor.

Finally, the period 2020–2025 underscores the cyclical nature of irregular migration: enforcement measures, such as deportations and readmission agreements, have limited effectiveness in the absence of structural solutions in Pakistan and coordinated labor mobility schemes in Europe. The persistence of irregular flows demonstrates that policy and structural factors, rather than individual opportunistic behavior alone, are central drivers of contemporary Pakistani migration to Europe.

2.2. The Western Balkan Route: A Fragile Corridor

The Western Balkan route has emerged as one of the primary pathways for irregular migration from Pakistan to Europe, largely due to relatively porous borders, limited institutional capacity, and insufficient infrastructure for managing migrant flows (UNHCR, 2024; Benedek et al., 2023). Transit states along this corridor—including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia—play a critical role in shaping migration experiences, yet face substantial challenges in providing adequate reception, protection, and legal processing for migrants.

Pakistani irregular migrants frequently experience prolonged stays in informal or semi-formal transit camps, which are often overcrowded and lack essential services such as clean water, healthcare, sanitation, and access to legal counsel (UNHCR, 2024). In addition, limited access to asylum procedures means that many migrants are unable to submit formal claims or receive timely decisions, effectively leaving them in a state of legal limbo. Reports also indicate harassment and pushbacks by border authorities, creating heightened vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation (Benedek et al., 2023).

The fragmented cooperation among Western Balkan states and the European Union further exacerbates these challenges. While the EU has invested in border control, surveillance, and readmission agreements, these efforts are not always harmonized across the corridor. Differences in national legislation, asylum procedures, and capacity for reception services lead to inconsistent enforcement and protection measures, leaving gaps in both humanitarian assistance and legal pathways (Triandafyllidou, 2021).

Moreover, the corridor is shaped by transnational smuggling networks, which exploit migrants' lack of legal channels, knowledge of the asylum system, and limited resources. Pakistani migrants often rely on these networks despite high financial costs—sometimes exceeding 3 million PKR per journey—and substantial risks to personal safety, including exposure to violence, exploitation, and unsafe travel conditions (IOM, 2024).

Institutional limitations are compounded by geopolitical and social factors. Western Balkan states are not primary destination countries, yet they bear significant responsibility for migrant management, often without commensurate EU support for infrastructure, capacity

building, or integration initiatives. Local populations may perceive migrants as a burden, which can lead to political tension and rising xenophobia, further complicating the humanitarian environment (Benedek et al., 2023).

Finally, the Western Balkan route exemplifies how structural, policy, and enforcement factors converge to shape irregular migration. Porous borders, limited institutional capacity, and inadequate coordination with the EU create an environment in which irregular migration persists, even as migrants face significant risks. Addressing these challenges requires not only enhanced legal pathways and protection mechanisms, but also capacity building, cross-border coordination, and regional inclusion of Western Balkan states as active stakeholders in migration governance.

2.3. European Union Migration Policy Post-2015

Following the 2015 refugee crisis, the European Union (EU) implemented a series of measures aimed at strengthening border control and deterring irregular migration, including the negotiation of readmission agreements, the externalisation of asylum processes, and financial and technical support to third countries for border management (Triandafyllidou, 2021). These policies were designed to reduce sudden influxes and enhance the EU's capacity to manage migration flows, particularly from conflict-affected regions. While these measures succeeded in limiting large-scale irregular arrivals in the short term, they largely failed to address structural push factors in origin countries, such as high unemployment, land inequality, and lack of labor market regulation in Pakistan (Khan & Borisova, 2024; IOM, 2024).

Fragmentation of EU migration governance remains a significant challenge. According to Eisele and Wiesbrock (2020), EU migration policy is weakened by the retention of key competences by member states, including control over visa issuance, labor recruitment, asylum reception, and integration programs. This fragmented approach results in inconsistent implementation of legal migration pathways, limits the EU's ability to coordinate ethical and effective migration policies, and contributes to the persistence of irregular migration from countries like Pakistan.

The European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum (2021) introduced measures to enhance coordination, including shared responsibility among member states, faster border procedures, and improved asylum processing mechanisms. However, implementation has been uneven due to differences in national capacities, political willingness, and institutional constraints (Triandafyllidou, 2021; European Commission, 2023). For example, while countries like Germany and Italy have piloted bilateral labor mobility schemes targeting specific sectors, other member states have focused primarily on enforcement and deportation, creating policy asymmetries across the EU.

Beyond enforcement, EU policies have increasingly incorporated the concept of external migration

management, which includes funding border security and asylum systems in transit countries, such as Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While this approach aims to contain irregular flows outside EU borders, it has raised ethical concerns regarding human rights protection, access to asylum, and the treatment of vulnerable migrants, particularly along the Western Balkan corridor (UNHCR, 2024; Benedek et al., 2023). Additionally, labor market dynamics in the EU have not been systematically aligned with migration policy. Persistent low-skilled labor shortages in sectors such as agriculture, construction, tourism, and healthcare contrast sharply with the limited legal migration channels available to Pakistani workers, sustaining irregular migration and reliance on smuggling networks (OECD, 2024). Scholars argue that policy coherence between labor demand and migration pathways remains underdeveloped, reducing both the effectiveness and ethical legitimacy of EU migration governance (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2014).

Finally, the EU's post-2015 migration policy illustrates the tension between security-oriented enforcement and development-oriented migration management. While border control, readmission agreements, and deportation measures have strengthened deterrence, they do not mitigate the structural push factors that drive migration from countries like Pakistan. A more holistic approach—incorporating legal labor migration pathways, development cooperation, and capacity building in transit states—has been proposed as a potential solution to reduce irregular flows while meeting EU labor needs (Triandafyllidou, 2021; Khan, 2024).

2.4. Pakistan's Structural Issues: Land and Labor Dynamics

Structural socio-economic conditions in Pakistan play a critical role in shaping migration pressures and contribute significantly to irregular migration flows to Europe. Land distribution in Pakistan is highly unequal, with only 2% of landowners controlling 45% of agricultural land, while 98% of households share the remaining 55% (Khan & Borisova, 2024). This concentration of land ownership restricts access to productive resources, reduces employment opportunities in rural areas, and limits the potential for smallholder agriculture to provide sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, land is not recognized as a national resource in the Pakistani Constitution, which constrains the government's ability to implement comprehensive land reforms, enforce equitable redistribution, or stimulate rural economic development. As a result, structural inequalities in land access create a persistent push factor for migration, particularly among youth seeking employment or alternative income sources.

In addition to land-related constraints, Pakistan suffers from chronic unemployment and underemployment, particularly among young adults. Official statistics report an unemployment rate of approximately 5.5% in 2024, but these figures underestimate the actual jobless population due to a large informal sector and

unregistered labor (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2024). The absence of a real-time, digital registry of unemployed individuals further impedes labor market planning and evidence-based policy-making, leaving millions of potential workers outside formal employment programs. This structural gap increases vulnerability to exploitation by human smuggling networks and encourages migration along irregular pathways, including the Western Balkan corridor.

To address these challenges, Kamran Khan (2024) proposed the development of a real-time, age-friendly digital unemployment registry at an international conference in Russia. Such a system would enable the government to identify labor supply and demand mismatches, target employment programs effectively, and facilitate structured engagement with foreign employers seeking skilled or semi-skilled workers. Integrating this registry with existing national databases, such as the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), could also improve transparency, reduce informal employment, and indirectly mitigate irregular migration pressures.

Furthermore, Pakistan's socio-economic landscape is shaped by high dependency on remittances, which reached \$34.1 billion in 2024 (IOM, 2024). While remittances provide essential income support, they are largely directed toward consumption rather than investment in productive sectors such as agriculture, small-scale industry, or entrepreneurship. This pattern reinforces structural unemployment and limits domestic job creation, indirectly sustaining the cycle of irregular migration.

Overall, land inequality, limited employment tracking, and underutilization of remittances form a structural triad that drives migration pressures. Addressing these systemic challenges is critical for reducing irregular migration and creating a more sustainable alignment between Pakistan's labor potential and Europe's labor demand. Policy interventions that combine land reforms, digital labor registries, and productive investment of remittances could not only strengthen domestic employment but also provide ethical, regulated pathways for labor migration, reducing dependence on irregular and risky routes.

2.5. Gaps in Readmission and Reintegration

Readmission agreements between Pakistan and EU member states—including the United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany—aim to return irregular migrants (European Commission, 2023). However, Koser (2022) argues that these agreements are largely ineffective due to a lack of comprehensive reintegration plans. Returned migrants often face the same socio-economic conditions that initially prompted migration, creating cycles of repeated irregular migration.

Punitive deportation mechanisms may further marginalize migrants, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking and informal labor exploitation (Schuster, 2022). Consequently, policy solutions should focus on creating legal migration channels, strengthening capacity in origin

countries, and promoting structural socio-economic reforms rather than relying solely on enforcement measures.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a policy-oriented qualitative research design to explore the complex dynamics of Pakistani migration to Europe via the Western Balkan route. The research aims to understand not only the structural drivers of irregular migration but also the effectiveness of European Union (EU) and Western Balkan migration policies, and the gaps that hinder strategic reform. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because it allows for a deep, interpretive understanding of socio-political dynamics, historical context, and institutional limitations that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. Such an approach facilitates the analysis of policy documents, migration reports, and secondary data to discern patterns, relationships, and policy implications within a broader socio-economic and geopolitical framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study relies exclusively on secondary data collected from credible international and national sources covering the period 2020–2025. These sources encompass migration statistics, government and institutional reports, and academic analyses, providing a comprehensive view of both origin and destination contexts. Data from migration monitoring agencies, policy reports, and statistical records were critically examined, with attention paid to definitions, units of measurement, and data collection methodologies, ensuring that comparisons and interpretations remained valid and reliable. Triangulation of these multiple sources enhances the robustness of findings by cross-verifying evidence, reducing potential bias, and allowing for nuanced insights into the interactions between migration drivers and policy responses (Patton, 2015).

Analytical techniques focused on thematic content analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to structural push factors in Pakistan, pull factors in Europe, and policy mechanisms along the Western Balkan corridor. Thematic coding enabled the identification of key relationships between socio-economic conditions, migration policy frameworks, and transit dynamics, while also highlighting contradictions and gaps in governance. This methodological framework ensures that the study captures the multi-dimensional nature of migration, including humanitarian, economic, and regulatory dimensions, providing a solid foundation for evidence-based recommendations.

By integrating policy analysis with secondary empirical data, this methodology allows for a holistic examination of irregular migration, situating individual migratory decisions within broader structural and institutional contexts. It also facilitates the formulation of practical policy insights aimed at harmonizing labor demand in the EU with domestic reforms in Pakistan, while

considering the strategic role of Western Balkan states as transit and potential destination countries.

3.1. Data Analysis

The study applies thematic content analysis to examine patterns, relationships, and recurring themes within the secondary data. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the underlying socio-economic, institutional, and policy factors that shape irregular migration from Pakistan to Europe via the Western Balkan route. By systematically reviewing documents, reports, and statistical records, the analysis captures both the structural drivers of migration and the responses of destination and transit countries, providing a nuanced understanding of the broader migration landscape.

The coding process involved categorizing information according to key dimensions of migration, including structural pressures in Pakistan, labor demand and opportunities in Europe, the functioning of policy instruments such as asylum procedures and readmission agreements, and the realities of transit through the Western Balkans. Through this approach, the study identifies patterns of causation and correlation, such as how employment deficits, land inequality, and lack of digital labor registration in Pakistan interact with restrictive legal channels and limited labor mobility in Europe to sustain irregular migration.

Thematic analysis also facilitates the identification of policy gaps and contradictions. By cross-referencing data from multiple sources, the study highlights areas where current interventions—whether through border enforcement, readmission agreements, or labor migration schemes—fail to address root causes or align with structural needs. Furthermore, it allows for contextual comparison, situating Pakistan's demographic pressures, land distribution, and labor capacity relative to European countries, revealing how disparities in size, population density, and economic structures influence both migration flows and policy responses.

Overall, this approach ensures a holistic interpretation of migration dynamics, connecting micro-level socio-economic conditions in Pakistan with macro-level policy frameworks in the EU and Western Balkans. It provides the analytical foundation for evidence-based policy recommendations, highlighting how coordinated reforms in labor, land, and governance can reduce irregular migration while aligning with European labor demand.

3.2. Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses exclusively on Pakistani irregular migration via the Western Balkan route, rather than maritime or direct flight routes to the EU. This route was selected due to its increasing prominence in migration statistics and associated policy challenges.

The analysis includes the broader EU policy framework, with emphasis on Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, given their active roles in readmission and border control agreements. While secondary sources provide rich insights, the study is limited by potential inconsistencies in data definitions, measurement units, and reporting methods across institutions.

4. RESULTS

Pakistani irregular migrants reach Europe through multiple migration pathways, with the Western Balkan corridor emerging as a critical overland route. Migrants traveling along this corridor move through Southeastern and Central European countries, passing through Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Croatia, before traversing the Western Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia. From these transit countries, migrants aim to reach EU destinations such as Italy, Germany, and France. The popularity of this route is driven by a combination of factors, including relatively porous borders, weak institutional capacity in transit states, and the limited availability of legal migration channels from Pakistan.

In addition to overland pathways, Pakistanis also utilize maritime routes to Southern Europe, particularly Italy and Malta, known collectively as the Central Mediterranean route. While these sea crossings are associated with higher financial costs and greater risk, they remain a significant channel for irregular migration due to the absence of formal labor migration opportunities. Similarly, the Eastern Mediterranean route, which involves sea crossings to Cyprus and Greece or land crossings from Turkey into Greece and Bulgaria, continues to

3.3. Ethical Considerations

As this research relies entirely on secondary data, no human subjects were directly involved, and formal consent or Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required. Nevertheless, the study adheres to high standards of academic integrity, transparency, and proper citation of all sources.

attract irregular migrants seeking access to EU labor markets and social welfare systems.

Empirical data from Frontex and other migration monitoring agencies indicate a growing reliance on the Western Balkan route between 2009 and 2023, reflecting both the persistent structural pressures in Pakistan and the limitations of European migration policy in providing safe and legal alternatives. Migrants often experience prolonged periods in transit, with limited access to asylum procedures or basic humanitarian services. These flows underscore the interconnectedness of push and pull factors, as socio-economic vulnerabilities in Pakistan intersect with labor demand in Europe and the institutional capacity of transit states to shape irregular migration patterns.

Overall, the analysis of migration flows highlights the multi-dimensional nature of irregular migration, showing that it is not simply the result of individual choices but emerges from complex structural, institutional, and policy contexts. These findings set the stage for examining asylum outcomes, readmission effectiveness, and socio-economic pressures, which are addressed in the following subsections. Table 1 presents the distribution of Pakistani irregular migration across major European routes during the observed period.

Table 1: Irregular border crossings by Pakistani migrants via major routes (2009–2023)

Year	Western Balkan (%)	Central Mediterranean (%)	Eastern Mediterranean (%)	Other (%)	Total Detections
2009	0.6	0.4	93.0	6.0	1,592
2010	1.0	1.4	95.6	2.0	3,878
2011	3.9	9.2	86.6	0.3	15,375
2012	17.7	25.8	56.4	0.1	4,877
2013	60.9	34.4	4.7	0.0	5,047
2014	8.9	84.0	6.6	0.5	4,115
2015	39.4	4.6	55.9	0.1	43,310
2016	31.1	15.4	53.5	0.2	17,973
2017	43.5	30.3	26.0	0.2	10,015
2018	20.4	30.3	48.4	0.9	4,988
2019	14.2	31.9	52.8	1.1	3,799
2020	11.2	53.7	34.6	0.5	2,603
2021	26.4	57.7	13.5	2.4	3,036
2022	53.0	29.6	17.3	0.2	12,022
2023	20.1	77.1	2.6	0.2	9,812
Grand Total	142,442	-	-	-	-

The Western Balkan route has become increasingly significant due to limited legal alternatives, porous borders, and weak institutional capacity in transit states (UNHCR, 2024; Benedek et al., 2023).

4.1. Asylum Applications and Readmission Outcomes

Eurostat (2025) indicates that only 12–14% of Pakistani asylum applications were approved in the European Union between 2020 and 2024, reflecting consistently low recognition rates across member states. The majority of applications were rejected, resulting in a significant number of Pakistani nationals remaining in irregular status or becoming subject to return and readmission procedures. Despite the existence of multiple readmission agreements between the EU and Pakistan, deportation figures remained relatively high throughout the period, suggesting that enforcement mechanisms continue to play a central role in EU migration governance.

However, the persistence of re-migration following deportation highlights the limited effectiveness of return-

focused policies in addressing the underlying drivers of migration. Many returned individuals face the same structural socio-economic conditions—such as unemployment, land inequality, and lack of formal reintegration support—that initially prompted migration. As a result, deportation often functions as a temporary interruption rather than a long-term deterrent, contributing to cyclical patterns of irregular movement.

Table 2 presents an overview of Pakistani asylum applications, approval rates, rejections, and deportations between 2020 and 2024, illustrating the imbalance between restrictive asylum outcomes and sustained migration pressure. These findings underscore the disconnect between EU enforcement-oriented approaches and the structural realities in Pakistan, reinforcing the argument that asylum and readmission mechanisms alone are insufficient to manage migration effectively without complementary legal migration pathways and reintegration strategies.

Table 2: Pakistani asylum applications and outcomes (2020–2024)

Year	Applications	Approved	Rejected	Deportations
2020	15,200	2,134	11,700	3,800
2021	16,800	2,450	13,000	3,600
2022	18,100	2,700	13,900	3,900
2023	19,700	2,850	14,900	3,400
2024	20,500	2,950	15,100	3,300

Low approval rates and repeated deportations indicate that enforcement-focused policies alone do not deter irregular migration. High rates of re-migration suggest gaps in reintegration support and structural employment opportunities (Koser, 2022; Schuster, 2022).

4.2. Socio-Economic Drivers in Pakistan (2020–2025)

Socio-economic conditions in Pakistan during the period 2020–2025 reveal a set of deeply entrenched structural factors that continue to generate strong migration pressures. One of the most significant drivers is severe land inequality, where a small elite of landowners controls a disproportionate share of agricultural land, while the majority of households have limited or no access to productive resources (Khan & Borisova, 2024). This concentration of land ownership restricts rural employment opportunities, undermines agricultural productivity, and contributes to persistent income insecurity, particularly among young and landless populations. As agriculture remains a major source of livelihood in Pakistan, unequal access to land translates directly into limited economic mobility and increased incentives to seek opportunities abroad.

Unemployment and underemployment further intensify these pressures. Although official figures indicate an unemployment rate of approximately 5.5% in 2024, this statistic masks the scale of informal and unregistered labor, which dominates large segments of Pakistan's economy (Khan, 2024). Many individuals classified as “employed” are engaged in low-paid, unstable, or

seasonal work that fails to provide sustainable livelihoods. The absence of a real-time digital labor registry exacerbates this challenge, as policymakers lack accurate data on labor market participation, skills distribution, and unemployment. Without such information, targeted employment programs and international labor cooperation initiatives remain limited in scope and effectiveness, leaving large segments of the population vulnerable to exploitation by irregular migration networks. Remittances play a dual role in shaping migration dynamics. In 2024, remittance inflows reached approximately \$34.1 billion, providing essential financial support to millions of households (IOM, 2024). While these transfers help alleviate poverty and stabilize household consumption, they are largely directed toward immediate needs such as food, housing, and education, rather than long-term productive investment. This pattern reduces pressure for structural reforms and limits domestic job creation, indirectly reinforcing migration incentives. As a result, remittances function more as a short-term coping mechanism than as a catalyst for sustainable economic development.

Taken together, land inequality, labor market informality, inadequate employment data, and consumption-oriented remittance use form a self-reinforcing cycle of structural joblessness and migration. Limited domestic opportunities push individuals toward irregular migration, while remittance inflows temporarily ease economic hardship without addressing underlying constraints. These dynamics help explain why irregular

migration from Pakistan persists despite restrictive asylum outcomes and repeated deportations, underscoring

5. DISCUSSION

This section interprets the empirical findings within the broader framework of migration theory, Pakistan's socio-economic realities, and European Union and Western Balkan migration governance. Rather than treating irregular migration as a temporary or crisis-driven phenomenon, the discussion highlights its structural, institutional, and policy-driven nature, distinguishing analytical observations from normative implications. The analysis demonstrates that persistent migration flows are the outcome of interacting governance failures across origin, transit, and destination contexts.

5.1. Structural Drivers of Migration: Persistent Push from Pakistan

The findings strongly suggest that irregular migration of Pakistani nationals through the Western Balkan route is primarily driven by entrenched structural pressures, rather than short-term economic shocks or individual opportunism. Severe land inequality remains a central factor shaping migration incentives. With a highly concentrated pattern of land ownership, access to productive agricultural resources is systematically restricted for the majority of households, particularly in rural areas where alternative employment opportunities are limited. This structural imbalance constrains income generation, reinforces rural poverty, and limits upward mobility, thereby sustaining long-term emigration pressures.

Labor market dynamics further intensify these structural push factors. Official unemployment figures underestimate the scale of joblessness and underemployment due to the dominance of informal and unregistered labor. The absence of a real-time digital unemployment or labor registry prevents effective labor market planning and targeted employment interventions, weakening the state's capacity to absorb demographic growth. In this context, migration emerges not as a discretionary choice but as a rational response to institutional gaps and governance constraints. Remittance inflows, while substantial, do not fundamentally alter these dynamics. Their primary use for consumption alleviates short-term household vulnerability but does not translate into productive investment or employment creation, reinforcing a cycle in which migration substitutes for domestic reform.

5.2. Fragmented EU Response and Policy Limitations

On the destination side, EU migration governance remains largely reactive and enforcement-oriented, prioritizing border control, readmission, and deterrence over structural alignment with labor market needs. Persistently low asylum recognition rates for Pakistani nationals indicate that asylum systems are ill-suited to address migration driven by economic and structural factors rather than individual persecution. The continued emphasis on deportation has not reduced migration pressure, as re-migration following return remains common,

the need for integrated domestic reforms alongside coordinated international migration policies.

underscoring the limited deterrent effect of return-focused strategies.

Institutional fragmentation within the EU further weakens policy coherence. While migration management is formally an EU-level concern, member states retain primary authority over labor migration schemes, visa issuance, and integration policies. This decentralization produces inconsistent practices and limits the EU's ability to develop coordinated legal pathways that could reduce irregular flows. The limited strategic engagement with Pakistan as a labor-sending country reflects a broader reliance on short-term containment measures rather than long-term mobility partnerships.

5.3. Western Balkans as Transit States

The Western Balkan countries occupy a structurally ambiguous position within European migration governance, functioning as buffer and transit zones without full inclusion in EU policy design. Limited institutional capacity, underdeveloped asylum systems, and insufficient reception infrastructure constrain their ability to manage sustained migrant presence. As a result, many Pakistani migrants experience prolonged stays in informal settings with restricted access to legal protections, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

These conditions contribute not only to humanitarian vulnerabilities but also to rising social and political tensions within host communities. The perception of migrants as a burden, combined with limited EU financial and technical support, fuels local resistance and xenophobic narratives. The marginal role assigned to Western Balkan states within EU migration planning reinforces reliance on irregular channels and ad hoc responses, rather than structured transit or labor mobility frameworks.

5.4. Irregular Migration and Labor Market Mismatch

A central contradiction highlighted by the findings is the disconnect between European labor demand and restrictive migration channels. Despite well-documented shortages in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and eldercare, legal access for low- and medium-skilled workers from countries like Pakistan remains limited. This structural mismatch creates conditions in which irregular migration becomes a functional, albeit risky, mechanism for labor market entry.

The underdevelopment of seasonal, circular, or temporary migration schemes further exacerbates this gap. Rather than reflecting a lack of willingness to work among migrants, persistent irregular flows indicate institutional rigidity and policy misalignment. Smuggling networks exploit this disconnect, filling the space left by inadequate legal mobility options.

5.5. Remittances and Domestic Structural Reform

Remittances occupy a paradoxical position within the migration-development nexus. While they provide essential income support and macroeconomic stability,

their consumption-oriented use limits their transformative potential. In the absence of land reform, employment expansion, and institutional modernization, remittances act as a safety valve that reduces immediate economic pressure without challenging underlying structural inequalities.

This dynamic indirectly sustains irregular migration by normalizing outward mobility as a household survival strategy. Without mechanisms to channel remittances into productive investment or job creation, migration remains a substitute for domestic reform rather than a complement to development.

5.6. Policy Gaps and Contradictions

Overall, the findings reveal significant policy gaps and contradictions across the Pakistan–EU–Western Balkans migration system. Origin-country structural constraints remain unaddressed, transit countries lack institutional support and strategic inclusion, and destination policies prioritize control over coordination. These fragmented approaches collectively reproduce irregular migration rather than mitigating it. The persistence of migration flows despite enforcement measures underscores the need for integrated governance frameworks that align labor markets, development strategies, and mobility pathways across regions. Table 3 provides an overview of the key structural and policy gaps identified in the analysis.

Table 3: Key Structural and Policy Gaps Identified in the Analysis

Area	Observed Gap
Legal migration	Demand exists, but formal agreements are missing
Land reforms	Critical in Pakistan, but ignored in migration dialogue
Border control	Increased budgets, yet re-migration persists
Readmission	High volume, low reintegration support
Digital labor registry	Proposed by Khan (2024), not implemented
Development aid	Not linked to migration cooperation

Misaligned priorities between sending and receiving countries limit the effectiveness of current migration governance frameworks.

5.7. Towards an Analytical Framework for Ethical Migration (Expanded)

The preceding discussion underscores the need for an analytical framework that situates irregular migration within broader developmental, institutional, and governance contexts, rather than treating it primarily as a security or border management issue. An ethical migration framework must recognize that migration is not an isolated phenomenon but a structural outcome of uneven development, labor market imbalances, and policy misalignment across origin, transit, and destination regions. In line with Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014), migration should be understood as both a consequence and a component of development processes, requiring integration into long-term economic planning rather than episodic crisis responses.

Central to such a framework is the role of data-driven labor governance. The absence of comprehensive, real-time labor market data in countries like Pakistan limits the ability of both domestic authorities and international partners to design targeted employment interventions or legal mobility schemes. Digital labor and unemployment registries can serve as foundational tools for aligning labor supply with international demand, improving transparency, and reducing reliance on informal or exploitative migration channels. Without accurate labor

data, migration governance remains reactive and fragmented.

An ethical approach further necessitates the expansion of legal and regulated migration pathways that correspond to actual labor market needs in Europe. Restrictive entry channels, particularly for low- and medium-skilled workers, do not eliminate migration pressures but instead redirect them into irregular routes managed by smuggling networks. Legal pathways—such as seasonal, circular, or skills-matched mobility schemes—can reduce human vulnerability while meeting European labor shortages, thereby aligning ethical considerations with economic rationality.

Equally important is the institutional inclusion of transit regions, particularly the Western Balkan states, within migration governance frameworks. Their marginalization in EU planning undermines regional stability and creates humanitarian bottlenecks. Strengthening institutional capacity, asylum systems, and labor governance in these countries is essential for ensuring ethical treatment of migrants and consistent policy implementation across borders.

A holistic and ethical understanding of irregular migration requires moving beyond enforcement-driven paradigms toward integrated frameworks that combine development policy, labor market coordination, and regional governance. Only by addressing structural inequalities, institutional data gaps, and policy fragmentation can migration be managed in a manner that is both effective and ethically sustainable.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends a shift from enforcement-centered migration management toward coordinated,

development-oriented governance linking Pakistan, the European Union, and the Western Balkan states. Central

to this approach is the expansion of legal and regulated migration pathways that align European labor shortages with Pakistan's surplus workforce, thereby reducing reliance on irregular routes and smuggling networks. Such pathways should be supported by pre-departure training, skills certification, and ethical recruitment mechanisms. At the domestic level, Pakistan requires structural reforms that address persistent unemployment and land inequality, including the introduction of a real-time digital unemployment registry and policies that promote the productive use of remittances. Without these reforms, remittances will continue to function as short-term household support rather than as a driver of sustainable employment and economic transformation.

At the regional level, the findings underscore the necessity of integrating Western Balkan countries as full

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined Pakistani irregular migration to Europe via the Western Balkan route during the period 2020–2025, with the aim of identifying the structural, policy, and governance dynamics that sustain these migration flows. The findings demonstrate that irregular migration is not primarily the result of isolated individual decisions or temporary crises, but rather a predictable outcome of long-standing structural constraints in Pakistan combined with fragmented and enforcement-oriented migration governance in Europe. Deep land inequality, persistent unemployment, and the absence of a comprehensive digital labor registry continue to limit domestic livelihood opportunities, particularly for young and underemployed populations. In this context, irregular migration emerges as a rational response to constrained economic mobility rather than an exceptional or deviant behavior.

On the destination and transit side, European Union and Western Balkan policy frameworks have largely emphasized containment, border enforcement, and readmission mechanisms, while offering limited legal alternatives that correspond to labor market demand. Persistently low asylum recognition rates for Pakistani nationals and the cyclical nature of deportation and re-migration highlight the limited effectiveness of deterrence-based approaches in addressing structurally driven migration. At the same time, substantial remittance

stakeholders in migration governance, rather than treating them solely as transit zones. Strengthening institutional capacity, asylum infrastructure, and labor coordination in these states is essential for reducing humanitarian gaps and improving policy coherence. More broadly, enhanced regional coordination among Pakistan, the EU, and the Western Balkans—supported by shared data systems, regular policy dialogue, and migration literacy initiatives—can improve transparency and public understanding while countering misinformation and xenophobia. Taken together, these recommendations advocate for a holistic and ethical migration framework that balances labor market needs, human security, and long-term development objectives, while acknowledging the qualitative nature of the evidence and avoiding claims of direct causality.

inflows provide short-term household stability but do not translate into productive investment or employment generation, particularly in a context where significant land resources remain underutilized. These dynamics reflect broader policy misalignment and governance fragmentation across Pakistan, the European Union, and the Western Balkan states, which collectively enable irregular migration networks to persist.

The study therefore underscores the importance of ethical, development-oriented, and cooperative migration strategies that align labor supply with demand while addressing root causes at their source. Legal migration pathways, data-driven labor governance through digital registries, land reform initiatives, and the institutional inclusion of Western Balkan states emerge as complementary components of a more coherent migration framework. Although the qualitative methodology does not allow for formal causal inference, the evidence provides a robust analytical foundation for actionable policy design. Overall, the findings reaffirm that irregular migration is a multi-dimensional phenomenon shaped by structural inequalities and policy fragmentation, and that future migration governance must move beyond narrow enforcement-based measures toward sustainable, ethical, and mutually beneficial approaches for both origin and destination countries.

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