

Tackling Migrant Smuggling in the Western Balkans

Illegal immigration along Western Balkan Route and neighbouring countries, July 2018 – June 2019

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Executive summary

Despite a significant decrease in the number of irregular migrants arriving at the EU's external borders since the migration crisis in 2015, migration pressure in the Western Balkans remains high, as well as demand for facilitation service¹. The Western Balkan region is a key transit area for irregular migrants entering the EU via the Eastern Mediterranean Route and trying to continue their journey towards the EU by land.

In the Western Balkan region itself, there are two main migration routes. Both have been active for a long time and are sustained by criminal activities of OCGs involved in the facilitation of illegal immigration. The first route begins in Albania and largely traces the Adriatic Coast, continuing to Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, although some irregular migrants also continue their travel to Kosovo.² The second route runs from North Macedonia to Serbia and onwards to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary or Romania.

Although some irregular migrants try to cross borders in the Western Balkan region on their own, given the fact that they need to bypass reinforced borders several times and on some occasions need to move across difficult and unknown terrain, the demand for facilitation services in the Western Balkans region is high. Both opportunistic smugglers and sophisticated OCGs are active in the Western Balkan region, concentrating their criminal business on areas with a high concentration of irregular migrants.

The most commonly used means of smuggling is concealment in vehicles, in particular cars, (mini-)vans, and trucks. Facilitation of illegal immigration remains a deadly business. Not only are irregular migrants increasingly transported in life threatening, dangerous and overcrowded conditions, migrant smugglers in the Western Balkan region regularly engage in aggressive, dangerous and reckless behaviour, especially when they try to avoid apprehension.

In, most cases, apprehended migrant smugglers are citizens of Western Balkan countries. Besides citizens of the Western Balkan countries, apprehended migrant smugglers are third country nationals coming from the same country as the smuggled irregular migrants. Most apprehensions in the region concern the drivers of the vehicle transporting irregular migrants, while the main organisers and potential high value targets remain mostly out of reach of law enforcement authorities.

The migrant smuggling landscape in the Western Balkan region continues to evolve and adapt, posing challenges for law enforcement authorities (including those responsible for border management) and asylum agencies. The threats arising from the highly profitable business of migrant smuggling require therefore a cross cutting, holistic, and structured response.

¹ Europol

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

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Introduction

Despite the fact that overall numbers of irregular migrant arrivals at the EU's external borders have considerably decreased since the 2015 migration crisis, migration pressure in the Western Balkans remains high, as well as the demand for facilitation services. Data from the region illustrates the high number of irregular migrants trying to make their way to the EU³, as well as a high withdrawal rate⁴ of asylum applications in EU Member States neighbouring the Western Balkan countries⁵ and increased activities of migrant smugglers⁶ facilitating illegal immigration.⁷

Almost all⁸ illegal stayers detected in the Western Balkan region between July 2018 and June 2019 were third country nationals from outside the region (Afghans, Algerians, Bangladeshis, Indians, Iranians, Iraqis, Pakistanis and Syrians). Only 5% were citizens of the region and 1% nationals of EU Member States (EU MSs) and Schengen Associated Countries (SACs).⁹ The majority of these third country nationals do not see the region as the final destination but rather as an area to cross on their way to Western Europe.¹⁰

The illegal migration situation in the Western Balkan region is influenced by factors outside the region, in particular the continuous arrival of irregular migrants via the Eastern Mediterranean Route and depend also on enhanced activities by Turkey to prevent departures.¹¹

The continuous migration pressure in the south of the region is combined with enhanced border control activities throughout the Western Balkans, hindering illegal border-crossings and making it more difficult for irregular migrants to leave the region. This leads to pressure build-ups in the region, as highlighted by rising numbers of irregular migrants present in some areas.¹² It also increases the demand for facilitation services, which has already been high. As a result, Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) and opportunistic migrant smugglers remain very active along the different Balkan routes.

This report focuses not only on the migrant smuggling situation between July 2018 and June 2019 in the six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹³, Montenegro, North

³ Between July 2018 and June 2019, more than 36 000 detections of illegal stayers were reported by the six Western Balkan countries, with the monthly average starting to exceed 3 200 in March 2019. This rise was largely due to increasing number of detections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (more than 26 000) and Serbia (more than 5 300) (Frontex).

⁴ The withdrawal rate - the ratio of applications withdrawn applications to the total number of applications lodged - is only indicative because withdrawn applications in one given period are not linked to applications lodged in the same period (it is not cohort data).

⁵ EASO

⁶ The terms facilitator and migrant smuggler are used interchangeably here. Both terms refer to persons involved in the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident or enabling of a person to remain in a country illegally.

⁷ Estimation based on an increase in reported cases of apprehended migrant smugglers by Member States and operational partners (Europol).

⁸ 94% (Frontex - Western Balkans Daily Information Exchange Data)

⁹ Frontex - WB Daily Information Exchange Data

¹⁰ Frontex - data analysis

¹¹ Between July 2018 and June 2019 Turkish authorities prevented over 43 500 departures by sea and over 43 000 by land.

¹² Between July 2018 and June 2019, the number of detections of the main nationalities was 28 300, a number three times higher than during the same period the year before. Bosnia and Herzegovina reported roughly 22 500 detections of the mentioned nationals (300% more than in the same period of 2017-2018). Serbia reported roughly 4 000 detections, or more than 900% more than in July 2017-June 2018, while Albania saw more than 2 500 or 200% more than in the same period of 2017-2018 (Frontex).

¹³ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Macedonia and Serbia), but also analyses the impact on neighbouring EU MS (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia). It relies on available data from Europol, EASO¹⁴ and Frontex provided by EU MS and Western Balkan countries, as well as information provided by the European Migration Liaison Officer (EMLO) in Belgrade.

Routes and key locations

Most irregular migrants arrive in the Western Balkan region over land from the south, coming from Greece or Bulgaria,¹⁵ often using the services of migrant smugglers.¹⁶ However, citizens of some countries – China, India, Tunisia, and Turkey – also arrive in the region by plane, profiting from visa-free regimes.¹⁷

One indicator of the migratory pressure in the Western Balkan region are asylum applications and withdrawal rates¹⁸ in Bulgaria and Greece. In both Bulgaria and Greece, a considerable proportion of asylum applicants absconded before a decision on their applications was issued, as indicated by the respective withdrawal rates: 28% in Bulgaria¹⁹ and 23% in Greece, compared to an EU+²⁰ average of 8%.²¹ High withdrawal rates typically indicate the intention not to pursue asylum in a given country, and possibly signal the beginning of secondary movements towards other EU+ countries. Especially Greek asylum authorities remain under considerable pressure, ranking second in the EU+ in terms of applications received compared to its population size.²² The number of asylum applicants awaiting a final decision on their applications in Greece was considerable at the end of June 2019 (when 82 900 cases were pending), having increased by 32% compared to July 2018 (62 965 cases).²³ Bulgaria received far fewer applications than Greece, but from the same top three countries of origin (Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria).²⁴ Moreover, in Bulgaria, unaccompanied minors (UAMs) represented one in five of all asylum applicants in 2018.²⁵

In the Western Balkan region itself, there are two main migration routes (see image 1). Both have been active for a long time and are sustained by criminal activities of OCGs involved in the facilitation of illegal immigration.

The first route begins in Albania and largely traces the Adriatic Coast, continuing to Montenegro, although some irregular migrants also continue their travel to Kosovo²⁶ and further on the Serbia. Continued migration pressure exists on the Albanian-Montenegrin border²⁷, and many migrant

¹⁴ The contributions for this joint report from EASO are based on Eurostat data.

¹⁵ Frontex aggregated WB Daily data

¹⁶ Europol

¹⁷ EMLO Belgrade

¹⁸ The withdrawal rate is the ratio of withdrawn applications to the total number of applications lodged. However, this ration is only indicative, since withdrawn applications in one given period are not linked to applications lodged in the same period (it is not cohort data).

¹⁹ In period between 30/06/2018 and 01/07/2019, Bulgaria recorded 825 withdrawals. The proportion of applicants withdrawing their application before the end of the asylum procedure was higher among Iraqis (52%), whereas lower among Afghans (27%), Syrians (15%), Pakistanis (9%) and Iranians (7%).

²⁰ EU MS plus Norway, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Iceland.

²¹ EASO

²² Greece received some 67 225 asylum applications between July 2018 and June 2019.

²³ EASO

²⁴ Bulgaria received some 2 825 asylum applications between July 2018 and June 2019.

²⁵ EASO

²⁶ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

²⁷ Roughly 2 400 detections (largely deterred crossings) have been reported to Frontex between January and June 2019 (Frontex).

smugglers are active in the Northern part of Albania.²⁸ From Montenegro, irregular migrants mostly travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina²⁹, with the intention of entering the EU via Croatia. This route appears to be mostly used by Iraqis and Syrians,³⁰ who are in some cases supported by regionally active OCGs.³¹



Image 1. Main illegal immigration flows in Western Balkans and neighbouring countries (movements of irregular migrants overlap with facilitation of illegal immigration by migrant smugglers)³²

²⁸ Europol

²⁹ Pressure at the border between Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina peaked in March 2019, when over 1 000 illegal border-crossing attempts (largely deterred) were observed (Frontex).

³⁰ Frontex aggregated WB Daily data

³¹ Europol

³² The information presented in this figure is the result of the joint analysis and therefore does not directly represent data just from one of the agencies.

The other main entry point for the Western Balkan routes is North Macedonia. This route has a high prevalence of irregular migrants from Algeria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.³³ In this part of the region, most apprehended migrant smugglers are local opportunistic smugglers and regional OCGs, transferring irregular migrants from Greece across North Macedonia towards Serbia.³⁴ The North Macedonian border villages with Greece in the Gevgelija and Dojran region are the places through which migrant smugglers facilitate illegal entry to North Macedonia.³⁵ The most commonly reported route used by migrant smugglers to transit North Macedonia goes from Medzhitlija, through Demir Hisar, Kichevo, Gostivar, Tetovo towards Kumanovo. In the Kumanovo – Lipokovo region, close to the border with Serbia, migrant smugglers accommodate irregular migrants in private or abandoned houses or in camps until they cross the border with Serbia.³⁶ Some irregular migrants also reach Serbia from Bulgaria.

From Serbia, the route branches in two directions. Some irregular migrants try to enter the EU directly from Serbia to Croatia or Hungary, while others move to Bosnia and Herzegovina, either directly or via Montenegro, in order to attempt to enter Croatia from there. In March 2019, there was a peak in the number of illegal border-crossings from Serbia towards Hungary³⁷ and Croatia.³⁸ At least in the latter country, this is most likely to be the main explanation for the rising number of asylum applications registered as of April 2019: two-thirds of the 310 applications lodged in Croatia in the first half of 2019 were registered between April and June.³⁹ This peak in illegal migration is largely deemed to be the result of strengthened border controls in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as improved weather conditions. After this peak, the pressure at both sections began showing signs of easing towards June.⁴⁰

In Serbia, the key locations where OCGs actively recruit irregular migrants are Belgrade and Obrenovac, just south of Belgrade.⁴¹ The main migrant smuggling sites in Belgrade, the so-called Afghan park and nearby located cafés, remain relevant hubs after a quiet phase in January and February 2019.⁴² Since the beginning of 2019, Obrenovac has become another major site for organised smuggling activities in Serbia, with many irregular migrants already bypassing Belgrade city centre. Some activities of migrant smugglers have also been noticed on the route from Serbia towards Romania, with Kikinda as main exit area.⁴³ More recently, there have also been detections of irregular migrants travelling in the opposite direction, from Serbia via North Macedonia to Greece, facilitated by migrant smugglers.⁴⁴

Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular forms a bottleneck. Many irregular migrants are stranded in the country as a result of increased efforts of the authorities to prevent crossings into Croatia. Irregular

³³ Between July 2018 and June 2019, North Macedonia reported to Frontex roughly 20 000 attempted crossings at its border with Greece, with average values above 1 600 / month. Pressure increased over March - July 2019 period with the average values above 2 100 detections (Frontex).

³⁴ Europol

³⁵ OP contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

³⁶ OP contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

³⁷ 930 (Frontex - WB Daily information exchange data)

³⁸ 620 (Frontex - WB Daily information exchange data)

³⁹ EASO

⁴⁰ Around 630 detections reported to Frontex at the Hungarian-Serbian border and 150 at the Croatian-Serbian section (Frontex).

⁴¹ EMLO Belgrade

⁴² EMLO Belgrade

⁴³ EMLO Belgrade

⁴⁴ EMLO Belgrade

migrants continue to reach the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, both via Montenegro and Serbia. The level of pressure at the border with Serbia increased along with improved weather conditions in March, and then continued at a relatively high level towards June. In the period April – June, between 600 and 1 000 deterred crossings were registered on both sides of the border.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to prevent exits towards the territory of Croatia.⁴⁶

The key area in Bosnia and Herzegovina for gathering irregular migrants, but also for activities of OCGs, is Sarajevo. From there, irregular migrants continue towards Mostar, Livno, Bihać, Bosanska Gradiška, Bosanski Brod or Orašje.⁴⁷ Other areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina from which criminal networks operate to facilitate illegal immigration towards the EU are the border areas of Velika Kladusa, Novi Grad and Bihac.⁴⁸

From Bosnia and Herzegovina, irregular migrants try to cross the external border of the EU into Croatia. Croatian authorities have invested considerable efforts at the common border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, installing technical obstacles in the areas adjacent to at least three border crossing points (Maljevac, Gejkovac and Pasin Potok). Despite these efforts, the number of detections reported by Slovenia indicate that after lower numbers in the winter months, movements via Croatia have intensified along with improving weather through March and April and continued in May and June 2019.⁴⁹ Slightly less than half of the 3 240 asylum applications recorded in Slovenia between July 2018 and June 2019 were lodged in the four-month period between March and June 2019.⁵⁰ It is significant that Slovenia received far more applications than Croatia in the first semester of 2019,⁵¹ and nationals of Algeria and Morocco lodged almost half of those applications. These two citizenship groups rarely applied for asylum in Croatia or other EU+ countries located along the Western Balkan routes. Slovenia typifies as a transit country with regard to asylum-related migration, in that it had the highest withdrawal rate in the EU+: between July 2018 and June 2019, almost nine in ten applications lodged were withdrawn before a decision was issued.⁵² In 2018, most of the irregular migrants in Croatia were intercepted in the police districts Primorsko – Goranska and Vukovarsko Srijemska, followed by Karlovačka.⁵³ This is consistent with apprehensions of migrant smugglers reported to Europol, although the apprehension of migrant smugglers in Croatia took place in all districts neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.⁵⁴

Measures implemented by the authorities of some of the countries in the region, such as strengthening of border controls, have had an effect on the migratory routes, hindering movements throughout the region. At the same time, these measures primarily appear to slow down or divert migratory movements, instead of preventing or deterring them altogether. Irregular migrants try to cross borders multiple times and many eventually succeed.⁵⁵ Another side effect of these measures is that they increase the demand for facilitation services.

⁴⁵ Frontex - WB Daily information exchange data

⁴⁶ In the first half of 2019, authorities prevented over 4 100 migratory movements towards or across the common border with Croatia, with a peak of 1 000 in May followed by an apparent small decline to around 900 in June (Frontex).

⁴⁷ Europol

⁴⁸ EMLO Belgrade, Europol

⁴⁹ In March more than 1000 detections, and April more than 1400 detections in May around 1 400 detections and June around 1 200 detections (Frontex).

⁵⁰ EASO

⁵¹ Between July 2018 and June 2019, Croatia received some 705 asylum applications.

⁵² EASO

⁵³ Official HR statistics

⁵⁴ Europol

⁵⁵ Frontex - analytical findings

Migrant smugglers and OCGs active in the region

Given the fact that irregular migrants transiting the Western Balkan region need to bypass reinforced borders several times and on some occasions need to move across difficult and unknown terrain, the demand for facilitation services in the Western Balkan region remains high. Facilitators try to capitalise on the presence of many irregular migrants stuck in the region to promote their services and recruit potential clients for their criminal business. They usually focus their activities on places with a high concentration of irregular migrants. This includes major towns and cities with good transportation connections, reception centres and migrant camps.

Both opportunistic smugglers, offering their services on an ad-hoc and regional basis, and sophisticated OCGs are active in the Western Balkan region. The more sophisticated OCGs have interconnected cells operating in each country along their smuggling routes and are specialised in facilitating irregular migrants from different countries of origin. Members of these OCGs have specific roles, such as recruitment, transportation, and accommodation.⁵⁶ Many of the OCGs offer packages from the departure point to the final destination, passing through the Western Balkans region. It has been reported that in Western Balkan countries several international OCGs make use of the same local smuggler to carry out certain activities on the ground.⁵⁷ Cooperation between local OCGs across borders is also common, with one OCG organising the border crossing, after which members of the other OCG await the irregular migrants and organise their further transport.⁵⁸

Between July 2018 and June 2019, border authorities of the six Western Balkan countries and five neighbouring EU MS reported 795 detected facilitators. This number is similar to that reported in the same period of 2017-2018.⁵⁹

Compared with the same period in 2017-2018, more facilitators were reported in the northern part of the region between July 2018 and June 2019. 143 migrant smugglers were apprehended on both sides of the Serbian-Hungarian border, up from 61 during the same period a year before. A further 52 migrant smugglers were detected at the Croatian-Serbian border, 46 at the Serbian-Romanian border and 43 at the Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia border. Bosnia and Herzegovina (139) and Serbia (49) also reported 188 facilitators inside their territories between July 2018 and June 2019, compared with 151 in the same period of 2017-2018.⁶⁰ The Serbian police arrested a further 131 migrant smugglers, of which 106 were Serbian nationals. They were smuggling a total of 352 irregular migrants, including 141 Pakistanis, 79 Afghans, 30 Iraqis, and 10 Iranians.⁶¹

In the first eight months of 2019, and compared to the same period in 2018, Croatian authorities recorded an 80% increase in the registered number of criminal offences of migrant smuggling and a 90% increase in the number of apprehended migrant smugglers.⁶² During the same period, Slovenian law enforcement authorities saw a 47% increase in apprehended migrant smugglers.⁶³ One OCG dismantled by the Croatian law enforcement authorities had 14 members and was smuggling irregular

⁵⁶ MS contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

⁵⁷ OP contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

⁵⁸ Europol

⁵⁹ Frontex - RAN and WB Daily Information Exchange data

⁶⁰ Frontex - RAN and WB Daily Information Exchange data

⁶¹ EMLO Belgrade

⁶² Official HR statistics

⁶³ Official SI statistics

migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the EU. In the period from July until December 2018, they smuggled at least 119 irregular migrants over the course of 13 trips.⁶⁴

In the south of the region, at the entrance of the Western Balkan routes, border authorities detected 125 facilitators at the Greek-Albanian border between July 2018 and June 2019.⁶⁵ During the same period, the Albanian police arrested 61 migrant smugglers, responsible for facilitating 172 irregular migrants.⁶⁶ The Greek-North Macedonian border saw 69 detections, while the Serbian-North Macedonian section reported 47 detections.⁶⁷

Furthermore, Montenegrin authorities apprehended 41 migrant smugglers between July 2018 and June 2019, 39 of which were Montenegrin citizens.⁶⁸ During the same period, the North Macedonian police arrested 59 individuals based on migrant smuggling charges, responsible for smuggling 760 irregular migrants⁶⁹.

Case study

OCGs active in North Macedonia were found to cooperate with OCGs smuggling irregular migrants in Greece. Irregular migrants crossed the green border between Greece and North Macedonia near Dorjan and Gevgelija, supported by the OCG members active in Greece. After crossing the border, they were picked up by other OCG members and transported in trucks or other types of motor vehicles, sometimes supported by a forerunner vehicle, to the Kumanovo-Lipkovo Region, in particular the villages of Vaksince and Lojane. In those villages, irregular migrants would be temporarily sheltered at safe houses provided by collaborators of the OCG, before being further smuggled across the Macedonian-Serbian border, continuing their journey towards EU. The price for smuggling across North Macedonia was between EUR 150 and EUR 300 per person. Most of the smuggled migrants were nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan.⁷⁰

Information from police authorities in the region indicate that in, most cases, apprehended migrant smugglers⁷¹ are citizens of Western Balkan countries.⁷² In some cases, law enforcement officers have found to be involved in migrant smuggling.⁷³ Besides citizens of the Western Balkan countries, apprehended migrant smugglers are third country nationals coming from the same country as the smuggled irregular migrants, most notably Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Syrians, and Turks.⁷⁴ The vast majority of apprehended migrant smugglers are males, up to 95% in some countries.⁷⁵

This is corroborated by information from border authorities. Roughly, 67% of all facilitators detected by border authorities between July 2018 and June 2019 were nationals of Western Balkan countries, especially Serbs, nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albanians. Around 23% were citizens of an

⁶⁴ EMLO Belgrade

⁶⁵ Frontex RAN and WB Daily Information Exchange data

⁶⁶ EMLO Belgrade

⁶⁷ Frontex RAN and WB Daily Information Exchange data

⁶⁸ LO Montenegro

⁶⁹ EMLO Belgrade

⁷⁰ Operational partner contribution (Europol)

⁷¹ In the majority of cases, apprehended migrant smugglers are drivers of the vehicles transporting irregular migrant or owner of the safe houses.

⁷² MS & operational partner contribution (Europol)

⁷³ Operational partner contribution (Europol), EMLO Belgrade

⁷⁴ MS & operational partner (Europol), Europol

⁷⁵ Official HR statistics

EU Member State, mostly from countries neighbouring the region. The remaining 10% were third country nationals from outside the region, with Turks as the most numerous.⁷⁶

Modi Operandi

Some irregular migrants try to cross borders in the Western Balkan region on their own, without the use of migrant smugglers. They use smartphones, GPS devices, and maps to find their way across the borders. Irregular migrants have also been found to share maps through social media with marked locations where they could engage in begging, thus obtaining necessary funds.

Data available from Bosnia and Herzegovina⁷⁷ and Serbia⁷⁸ indicate that irregular migrants try to legalise their stay on the territories of countries in the region by expressing intentions to apply for international protection. They do so even if they do not intend to follow these expressions through, hoping to prevent return and gain extra time to organise the continuation of their journey.⁷⁹

However, growing difficulties in transiting the region have resulted in an increased demand for facilitation services. Both opportunistic smugglers and OCGs have responded to this demand by offering their services to irregular migrants.⁸⁰

Migrant smugglers in the Western Balkans region regularly engage in aggressive, dangerous and reckless behaviour, especially when they try to avoid apprehension. There have been several cases of migrant smugglers causing traffic accidents after driving away when law enforcement officers tried to stop them, resulting in injuries and even deaths of migrants.⁸¹ In extreme cases, migrant smugglers have even attacked law enforcement officers, attempting to run them over or otherwise injuring them.⁸²

Life threatening methods of concealment in vehicles is a particularly common modus operandi of facilitation of irregular migrants across borders throughout the Western Balkan region. Migrant smugglers use different kinds of vehicles to transport irregular migrants in the region, in particular cars, (mini-)vans, and trucks. Concealment methods range from simply hiding irregular migrants in the cargo space of a van or trunk of a car to constructing furniture around irregular migrants and sophisticated custom-built compartments.⁸³

It is common for criminals to use rental vehicles or fake licence plates to decrease the likelihood of detection by the authorities, as this means the vehicle cannot be easily traced to an individual.⁸⁴ During the summer, Croatia also reported the use of camper vans to smuggle irregular migrants into the

⁷⁶ Frontex RAN and WB Daily Information Exchange data

⁷⁷ Bosnia and Herzegovina received around 22 300 intentions to apply for international protection in 2018, while roughly 1 560 official applications were lodged with the country's Ministry of Security. The situation continued during the first six months of 2019, when roughly 10 500 intentions to apply for international protection were expressed while roughly 170 official applications were lodged. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, between January 2018 and June 2019, 15 persons were granted subsidiary protection, 51 persons had their applications rejected while in 502 cases the procedures were cancelled, mostly because the applicants were nowhere to be found (Frontex).

⁷⁸ In Serbia in 2018 there were roughly 8 400 registered expressions of intention to apply for international protection, and 5 200 registrations in reception facilities, with only 275 official applications eventually being lodged. Between January and June 2019, Serbia recorded roughly 4 400 registrations, while around 110 official asylum applications were lodged (Frontex).

⁷⁹ MS contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

⁸⁰ Europol, Frontex analytical findings

⁸¹ EMLO Belgrade, MS & operational partner contribution, Europol

⁸² MS & operational partner contribution, Europol

⁸³ MS & Operational partner contribution, Europol.

⁸⁴ Europol

country from Bosnia and Herzegovina and onwards to Slovenia.⁸⁵ The use of forerunner cars continues to be a common precaution measure by smugglers.⁸⁶ Local taxi drivers also regularly transport irregular migrants across the border.⁸⁷

Case study

An OCG led by an Afghan national who smuggles mostly Afghans and Iranians from Serbia and Hungary. This OCG uses the services of Serbian and Romanian nationals. Serbian nationals lead irregular migrants over the Serbian – Hungarian border on foot. Once the irregular migrants are on Hungarian side of the border, Romanian drivers (usually of low socio-economic profile) transport them to Budapest. In Hungary, the irregular migrants are divided in small groups of 2 – 3 persons and transferred further to Austria by public transportation, mostly trains. The members of the OCG accompany irregular migrants during the whole journey, but when they travel from Hungary to Serbia to smuggle a new group of irregular migrants they do not travel directly. Instead, they travel through Romania in order not to attract too much attention due to the often border crossing. For this smuggling services, Afghans pay EUR 3 000 -3 500 while Iranians pay EUR 4 500 -6 000.⁸⁸



Hiding in trucks is a common modus operandi used across the Western Balkan region. Irregular migrants try to climb into and hide in trucks transferring goods from one country to another, either on their own or with the assistance of facilitators.⁸⁹ When they receive assistance, smugglers open the customs seal without visibly damaging it to allow irregular migrants to enter and then close back the seal.⁹⁰

Migrant smuggling remains a deadly business. Increasingly, irregular migrants are transported in dangerous and overcrowded conditions and there have been several incidents in which irregular migrants died.⁹¹

Image 2. Concealment in vehicles is a common modus operandi throughout the Western Balkan region⁹²

⁸⁵ MS contribution, Europol

⁸⁶ EMLO Belgrade, operational partner contribution

⁸⁷ MS & Operational partner contribution, Europol

⁸⁸ MS contribution, Europol

⁸⁹ Europol

⁹⁰ MS contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

⁹¹ OP contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

⁹² Police authorities of Republic of North Macedonia



Image 3 and 4. A migrant smuggler caused a traffic accident while smuggling irregular migrants in an overcrowded truck⁹³

Several countries in the region regularly report large groups of irregular migrants being transported in vans, trucks, or even the trunk of cars.⁹⁴ For example, Serbian authorities have reported cases of Serbian migrant smugglers transporting between 14 and 18 irregular migrants in cars.⁹⁵ In three detections in North Macedonia involved local drivers transporting 22 persons in a SUV, 46 in a van, and even 79 in a truck. Recently, in North Macedonia migrant smugglers often use trucks to transport groups of more than 80 irregular migrants.⁹⁶ These groups of irregular migrants included unaccompanied minors.⁹⁷ The overall situation indicates an increased possibility for fatalities and increased danger for persons travelling clandestine.⁹⁸

There have also been attempts by irregular migrants to hide in cargo trains, in particular in the north of the region, from Serbia to other countries.⁹⁹

Besides smuggling irregular migrants concealed in vehicles, another common modus operandi involves gathering a group of irregular migrants at a pre-agreed location, from where they are transported by car or van to the border. In some cases, irregular migrants are smuggled across the border in the vehicle, while in other cases they are left near the border and guided or instructed on how to cross the border on foot.¹⁰⁰ In some cases, mountain trails are used to avoid detection, such as in some areas in Croatia¹⁰¹ and between Montenegro and Serbia.¹⁰²

Case study

OCGs active in Bosnia and Herzegovina organise migrant smuggling from Bihać, Velika Kladuša and Sarajevo further to the EU. Recruiters are particularly active near reception centres and migrant camps (such as Vucjak at the time), as well as other areas with a high concentration of irregular migrants.

⁹³ Police authorities of Republic of North Macedonia

⁹⁴ Operational partner contribution, Europol

⁹⁵ Operational partner contribution.

⁹⁶ Operational partner contribution, Europol

⁹⁷ EMLO Belgrade, operational partner contribution

⁹⁸ EMLO Belgrade, operational partner contribution

⁹⁹ EMLO Belgrade, Europol

¹⁰⁰ MS & operational partner contribution, Europol

¹⁰¹ Europol

¹⁰² EMLO Belgrade

When they form a larger group of irregular migrants, they smuggle them across the border to Croatia. The prices for this service are between EUR 2 000 and EUR 3 000. In some cases, OCG members use violence and extortion in order to obtain additional money for the smuggling of migrants.¹⁰³

Social media applications and GPS devices are used to share routes and pick up locations, as well as for other communication with the smugglers.¹⁰⁴ When a smuggler joins irregular migrants during their crossing, (s)he mixes in with the irregular migrants, making it hard for law enforcement authorities to prove that there was smuggling.¹⁰⁵ Once the irregular migrants have crossed the border, they are picked up again at the other side of the border by another vehicle.¹⁰⁶



Image 5. Croatian police authorities rescued several irregular migrants when they got stuck on a mountain trail¹⁰⁷

Alternatively, where rivers form a natural border, irregular migrants might have to cross by small inflatable boat or in some cases even by swimming. This modus operandi has been reported for border crossings from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Hungary, from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia, and from Croatia to Slovenia.¹⁰⁸ In some cases, thermal blankets are used to avoid detection by thermal cameras.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ OP contribution, Europol

¹⁰⁴ MS contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

¹⁰⁵ OP contribution to the SOCTA Mid-Term Review 2019

¹⁰⁶ Operational partner contribution, Europol

¹⁰⁷ Police authorities of Croatia

¹⁰⁸ EMLO Belgrade, MS & operational partner contribution, Europol

¹⁰⁹ EMLO Belgrade

Prices for migrant smuggling services¹¹⁰

Prices for migrant smuggling services in the Western Balkan region vary widely and depend on a range of factors, such as the route, the number of irregular migrants in the group, modus operandi, and whether or not crossing is guaranteed. Some of the prices that have been reported are:

- From Greece to Serbia: around EUR 700 per person;
- From Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina: between EUR 300 and EUR 500 per person;
- From Bosnia and Herzegovina to Slovenia: EUR 2 000 per person;
- From North Macedonia to Serbia: between EUR 150 and EUR 600 per person;
- From Serbia to Hungary by boat: around EUR 1 000 per group;
- From Croatia and Slovenia to Italy: between EUR 3 000 and EUR 4 000 per person;

Prices for full packages from the home country to the destination country, passing through the Western Balkans, can reach up to EUR 10 000.

Payment is done either in cash, via payment services such as Western Union or Moneygram, or through the Hawala system, an informal money transfer system relying on a wide network of Hawala operators. Irregular migrants deposit the sum with a Hawala operator and only when they have arrived their destination can the smuggler claim the money.

Document fraud is a common enabler of migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans, especially when irregular migrants try to cross at regular border crossing points. In 2018, the most common users of fraudulent documents were Iranians, Turks, and citizens of Kosovo^{111,112}.

As long there is a willingness of irregular migrants to continue the journey, migrant smugglers and OCGs will continue recruiting irregular migrants and facilitating illegal immigration. In some cases, this could lead to networking of different regionally active OCGs, but also to creating international business networks with branches in each country on the route.¹¹³

Challenges

The movement of irregular migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean influences illegal migration in the Western Balkan region and neighbouring countries, with Albania and North Macedonia as the main entry points.¹¹⁴ The Western Balkan region is a key transit area for irregular migrants entering the EU via the Eastern Mediterranean Route and trying to continue their journey towards the EU countries by land.¹¹⁵

Ongoing migratory pressure exists at the main entry and exit points of the Western Balkans region.¹¹⁶ Recent figures indicate an increase in arrivals of irregular migrants via the Eastern Mediterranean

¹¹⁰ MS & operational partner contribution, Europol

¹¹¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

¹¹² EML0 Belgrade, MS & operational partner contribution, Europol

¹¹³ Europol

¹¹⁴ Europol, Frontex analytical findings

¹¹⁵ Europol, Frontex analytical findings

¹¹⁶ Frontex WB Daily Information Exchange data

Route, both by land and by sea, as well as a growing number of interceptions of irregular migrants in the Western Balkan countries.¹¹⁷

Although the main migratory routes in the region remain active, enhanced border control measures implemented by some of the countries produce several side effects, hindering movements throughout the region. The main impact of these measures appears to be a slow-down of migratory movements rather than prevention or deterrence, as irregular migrants try to cross state borders multiple times, identify new travel alternatives¹¹⁸ or are facilitated by migrant smugglers¹¹⁹, often managing to succeed eventually. It also leads to increased pressure on certain territories due to the continuous arrival and accumulation of irregular migrants.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, enhanced control activities and irregular migrants' perceptions thereof remain important deterrent factors to prevent large escalations of the size of the flows.¹²¹

Some irregular migrants lodge applications for international protection in the Western Balkans and neighbouring countries, at times to avoid detention and/or return and to be able to continue towards their preferred destination country. After expressing an intention to apply for asylum, irregular migrants can benefit from obtaining temporary legal status and accommodation and support in reception centres and meanwhile find a way to continue their journey. High withdrawal rates indicate that in some cases applicants abscond from reception facilities and continue their journey, in a cycle of multiple and often-unsuccessful onward-movement attempts,¹²² of the four countries with the highest withdrawal rates in the EU+, three were located along the Western Balkan route (Slovenia, Romania and Croatia). This increases the workload of border guards, migration authorities¹²³ and asylum authorities¹²⁴ and reduces the ability of national authorities to quickly and efficiently process asylum applications and offer protection to those with legitimate needs. The outflow of asylum applicants contributed to keeping the number of pending cases (and consequently pressure on the reception systems) under control in most of the EU countries located along the Western Balkan route, with the notable exception of Greece.¹²⁵

As difficulties in transiting the region result in an increased demand for migrant smuggling services, facilitated illegal immigration along the Balkan routes remain a major challenge for law enforcement agencies in the region.¹²⁶ Migrant smugglers and OCGs concentrate their criminal business on areas with a high concentration of irregular migrants, where they try to recruit them.¹²⁷

Migrant smugglers and OCGs in the region use one of the most dangerous transportation methods: concealment in the cargo area of different kind of vehicles, such as overloaded cars, vans and trucks. Using this method, facilitators constantly put the lives of irregular migrants at risk, transporting them under life-threatening conditions and trying to hide the highest number of irregular migrants at once to maximise profits. Irregular migrants are often concealed in trunks or built-in hidden compartments

¹¹⁷ Europol, Frontex RAN and JORA data

¹¹⁸ Frontex analytical findings

¹¹⁹ Europol

¹²⁰ Frontex analytical findings

¹²¹ Frontex analytical findings

¹²² Frontex RAN and WB Daily Information Exchange data

¹²³ Frontex analytical findings FLO information exchange

¹²⁴ EASO

¹²⁵ EASO

¹²⁶ Europol, Frontex analytical findings

¹²⁷ Europol

for several hours without stopping in order to avoid apprehension.¹²⁸ There are regular cases of migrant smugglers driving recklessly and causing traffic accidents when transporting irregular migrants, resulting in serious injuries and even deaths.¹²⁹ In these cases, law enforcements officers combatting facilitation of illegal immigration are put under additional pressure due to the responsibility above all to protect the lives of irregular migrants in dangerous situations.

Another challenge law enforcement from the region face is an increase in violent and aggressive behaviour of migrant smugglers, not only towards irregular migrants but also towards law enforcement officers. This mostly involves attempts to run over police officers with a vehicle.¹³⁰

Some of the Western Balkan and neighbouring countries report a high increase in the number of apprehended migrant smugglers.¹³¹ However, this is not only the result of migrant smugglers' increased activities, but also of additional efforts on the side of law enforcement authorities to counter migrant smuggling. Most apprehensions in the region concern the drivers of the vehicle transporting irregular migrants, while the main organisers and potential high value targets remain mostly out of reach of law enforcement.



Image 6 and 7. Fatal consequences as a result of migrant smuggler causing a traffic accident¹³²

The Western Balkan countries and neighbouring countries continuously report cases of facilitation of illegal immigration. Nevertheless, the actual scope of the phenomena remains underreported by some countries, or cases are reported only after the dismantling of an OCG at national level. This not only influences the intelligence picture on facilitation of illegal immigration in the region, but could also lead to partial dismantlement of an OCG, targeting only one of the branches at the national level while ignoring other branches or cooperating OCGs. A comprehensive response to migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans and neighbouring countries should not focus on the regionally active OCGs alone, but also on the ones facilitating movements towards the Western Balkan countries and the ones enabling further secondary movements within the EU.

¹²⁸ Europol

¹²⁹ Europol

¹³⁰ Europol

¹³¹ In the first eight months of 2019, compared to the same period in 2018, Croatian authorities recorded a 90.71% increase in the number of apprehended migrant smugglers.

¹³² Police authorities of Greece

Way forward

The migrant smuggling landscape in the Western Balkan region continues to evolve and adapt, posing considerable challenges for law enforcement authorities (including those responsible for border management) and asylum authorities. The threats arising from an increase in migratory flows and the highly profitable business of migrant smuggling require a cross cutting, holistic and structured response of the concerned EU agencies, the Commission and the Member States. This response should include four categories of measures which are in line with the EU Western Balkans Strategy¹³³, referring to the role of the concerned EU agencies in reinforcing engagement on security and on migration.

1. Coherent measures for strengthening border management, asylum and return procedures, as well as efficient management of an increase in migratory flows¹³⁴

Among others, the measures should include:

- Strengthen the flow of strategic and tactical information in the prevention and fight against irregular migration and the return of third country nationals, in particular through the conclusion and operationalization of European Border and Coast Guard Status Agreements.
- Exploration of possibilities to stimulate the development of national biometric registration/data-sharing systems ensuring full convergence with EURODAC upon the EU accession.
- Support the collection and exchange of asylum data which are consistent with Eurostat standards and definitions. This will produce a supplementary flow of information (such as recognition and withdrawal rates) which will add much value to analyses of migration across the region.
- Establishing national coordination centers for border control in the Western Balkan countries and connecting them via a regional network with the national coordination centers for information exchange in the neighboring EU Member States.
- Facilitation of increased situational awareness by establishing a EUROSUR Specific Situational Picture for the Western Balkans region allowing Western Balkans countries to timely exchange relevant information with Frontex and the other concerned agencies as well as among each other.
- Building capacities of the Western Balkan authorities in collecting qualitative information from intercepted irregular migrants through interviews and share/analyse gathered information in order to properly ascertain and register irregular migrants and complement the existing intelligence picture.¹³⁵ Special attention should be paid to gathering information about the activities of migrant smugglers and sharing this information with Europol;¹³⁶
- Exploration of possibilities to train/hire more interpreters for Arabic, Punjabi, Urdu, Dari/Farsi and Pasto in order to support the process of registration and intelligence gathering;¹³⁷
- Enhancement of accommodation capacities in reception centres;¹³⁸
- Building the capacities of Western Balkan countries in return procedures, through:

¹³³ Communication from the Commission “A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, COM(2018) 65 final

¹³⁴ Frontex analytical findings

¹³⁵ Frontex proposed measures

¹³⁶ Europol

¹³⁷ Frontex proposed measures

¹³⁸ Frontex proposed measures

- Increasing the capacities to obtain travel documents necessary to return the intercepted irregular migrants who do not fulfil conditions for legal stay;
- Supporting the Western Balkan countries in negotiating readmission agreements with the main countries of origin (e.g. Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq);
- Supporting return operations/interventions and considering returns to countries deemed safe for irregular migrants who have not applied for protection although they are eligible¹³⁹;

2. Implementation of an efficient early warning mechanism

This would enable a timely, consolidated detection of potential threats, and ensure a promptly coordinated response of the authorities of the Western Balkan and neighbouring countries to undertake the necessary measures to neutralize the threats, if relevant, with the support of the EU agencies. One of the best practices in this area is the so-called ‘caravan of hope’, where an early warning from EU agencies and MS was followed by coordinated intelligence gathering and analysis of the available data. This resulted in crucial support for the Greek and Turkish authorities to successfully prevent massive illegal migratory movements towards the EU.

3. Increase of the presence of competent EU agencies in the region and increase of the cooperation with immigration liaison officers (ILOs) and European migration liaison officers (EMLOs) already present in the region

This would enhance coordinated operational and strategic cooperation between the Western Balkan countries, EU agencies and liaison officers present in the region¹⁴⁰. It will also build the capacity of the Western Balkans countries in using Europol’s available investigation tools, and lead to joint actions combating OCGs involved in migrant smuggling.¹⁴¹ These measures should include:

- The deployment of Europol liaison officers to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and the second Frontex liaison officer to the Western Balkan region (to be seated in Albania, covering also North Macedonia and Kosovo¹⁴²), as well as further support and strengthening of the position of the Europol liaison officer already deployed to Albania and of the Frontex liaison officer to the Western Balkans already deployed in Serbia (covering also Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina).¹⁴³
- A comprehensive approach of the EU agencies, promoting common EU standards and practices, including through international platforms and in cooperation with international organisations active in the region;¹⁴⁴
- Europol and Frontex organising and participating in Joint Action Days (JADs) in Western Balkan countries aiming at dismantling business networks of migrant smugglers in synergy with multiple stakeholders operating in the area;¹⁴⁵

¹³⁹ Frontex proposed measures

¹⁴⁰ Europol, Frontex analytical findings

¹⁴¹ Europol

¹⁴² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

¹⁴³ Europol and Frontex

¹⁴⁴ Europol, EASO Frontex proposed measures

¹⁴⁵ Europol, Frontex proposed measures

- The potential deployment of EU Member States screeners/ debriefers in the framework of Frontex joint operations implemented in Western Balkan countries, as well as improving the screening/debriefing capability of relevant officers in the authorities of Western Balkan countries.¹⁴⁶
- Increasing cooperation with ILOs and EMLOs and establishing healthy information sharing will further enhance monitoring of the situation in Western Balkan countries in order to prevent future volatile migration scenarios.¹⁴⁷

The proposed measures should enhance and improve the information flow from Western Balkan and neighbouring countries towards the EU agencies, and also among the EU agencies and ILOs and EMLOs active in the region. This would improve the efficiency of coordinated actions against migrant smugglers in the region implemented by different national and international stakeholders.¹⁴⁸

4. Reinforcement of comprehensive law enforcement strategies to identify and disrupt OCGs involved in migrant smuggling activities

Special attention should be given to the reinforcement of comprehensive law enforcement strategies to identify and disrupt OCGs involved in migrant smuggling activities in the Western Balkans.¹⁴⁹ The overall strategy should include:¹⁵⁰

- Making use to the fullest possible extent of the existing services and tools currently available, such as the Joint Liaison Task Force migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings;¹⁵¹
- Increase the deployment of Europol officers with mobile offices and Universal Forensic Extraction Devices (UFEDs) to support ongoing investigations;¹⁵²
- Organising operational meetings on cases involving facilitation of illegal immigration either in the region or in Europol's headquarters;¹⁵³
- Organising Joint Action Days (JADs) and deploying the necessary assets to support those actions;¹⁵⁴
- Identifying High Value Targets and establishing Operational Task Forces (OTF) involving Western-Balkan countries;¹⁵⁵
- Support judicial co-operation through participation in Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) involving Western Balkan countries;¹⁵⁶
- Support the operation of Task Force Western Balkan under the umbrella of EMPACT priority Facilitating Illegal Immigration, but also others operational activities in EMPACT priority Facilitating illegal immigration aiming to disrupt OCGs active in the Western Balkan region¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁶ Frontex proposed measures

¹⁴⁷ Europol

¹⁴⁸ Europol

¹⁴⁹ Europol

¹⁵⁰ Europol

¹⁵¹ Europol

¹⁵² Europol

¹⁵³ Europol

¹⁵⁴ Europol

¹⁵⁵ Europol

¹⁵⁶ Europol

¹⁵⁷ Europol

- Boosting and enhancing comprehensive strategies to fight against document fraud (prevention, detection and prosecution) including enhancing cooperation with private sector especially in regards to interception of the delivery of parcels containing fraudulent documents and continuing developing targeted operational measures against print shops massively producing and generating fraudulent documents;¹⁵⁸
- Support money laundering and financial investigations and increase the cooperation with private sector (money transfer companies) and banking sector using among others the capabilities of newly established Europol Financial Crime Centre;¹⁵⁹
- Support activities focusing on the new arising digital smuggling area i.e. use of digital technology, social media and Internet for facilitation of illegal immigration, such as active social media and Internet monitoring;¹⁶⁰
- Building capacity of the law enforcement officers from the region through specialized trainings focusing on the increase the capacity to proactively provide information to Europol, the new threats and challenges such as digital migrant smuggling and money laundering investigations and through reducing the lack of cultural mediators and interpreters in the law enforcement community.

¹⁵⁸ Europol
¹⁵⁹ Europol
¹⁶⁰ Europol