



# The Geopolitical Context of Migrant Routes and Its Impact on Organised Crime in the Republic of North Macedonia

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## Abstract

As a country with a specific geopolitical and geostrategic position, North Macedonia, positioned in the centre of the Balkan Peninsula, is subject to illegal migration and is located at the crossroads of migrant routes leading from Asia and Africa to Central and Western Europe. Therefore, the article makes an effort to answer two related questions. The first question refers to the geopolitical context of migrant routes and their impact on the increase in migrant smuggling, while the second one is the focus of migrant smuggling within organised crime groups. In terms

of time, the research covers the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology of this paper is based on an analysis of policy documents from open sources. Also, the authors surveyed more than one hundred Macedonian police officers who work directly on the borders and engage in the suppression of smuggling migrants, and an in-depth interview with the head of the National Unit for Combating Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in North Macedonia.

**Keywords:** geopolitics, illegal migration, migrant routes, organised crime, migrant smuggling

## **Geopolityczne uwarunkowania przebiegu szlaków migracyjnych i ich wpływ na przestępczość zorganizowaną w Republice Macedonii Północnej**

### **Abstrakt**

Ze względu na szczególną sytuację geopolityczną i geostrategiczną, położona w samym sercu Półwyspu Bałkańskiego Macedonia Północna jest celem nielegalnej migracji i znajduje się na skrzyżowaniu szlaków migracyjnych prowadzących z Azji i Afryki do Europy Środkowej i Zachodniej. Poniższy artykuł stara się zatem odpowiedzieć na dwa powiązane ze sobą pytania. Pierwsze pytanie dotyczy geopolitycznych uwarunkowań przebiegu szlaków migracyjnych i ich wpływu na nasilenie przemytu migrantów, natomiast drugie ogniskuje się wokół przemytu migrantów dokonywanego przez zorganizowane grupy przestępcze. W ujęciu czasowym, badanie objęło okres pandemii COVID-19. Podstawą metodologiczną niniejszego artykułu jest analiza dokumentów politycznych pochodzących z otwartych źródeł. Ponadto, autorzy przeprowadzili wywiady z ponad stoma macedońskimi funkcjonariuszami policji, którzy pracują bezpośrednio na granicy i są zaangażowani w zwalczanie przemytu migrantów, a także pogłębiony wywiad z naczelnikiem Krajowej Jednostki ds. Zwalczania Przemytu Migrantów i Handlu Ludźmi w Macedonii Północnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** geopolityka, nielegalna migracja, szlaki migracyjne, przestępczość zorganizowana, przemyt migrantów

## Introduction

In the last years of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have been witnessing drastic changes in migration flows through the Balkan Peninsula countries, primarily through the Western Balkans countries. It is a well-known fact that regular migration plays a vital role in shaping a country's political, security, sociological, economic, and demographic realities, and is a necessary process that is difficult to control and even more difficult to stop. However, what will be the subject of interest of this paper is illegal migration, and even more, organised crime with the smuggling of migrants, a relatively current process that deserves the special attention of the competent institutions for law enforcement, policies, and planning measures, as well as the activities of each country affected by these processes. Illegal migration is a process that is important from several aspects: the state's, the public's, the national, but also individual security. Illegal migration is often associated with severe and organised crime, but also with human rights violations.

From a geopolitical point of view, the Balkan region, and even more so the sub-region of the Western Balkans, is a transit zone to the EU, much less a country of origin and at least a final destination zone for illegal migrants. In this context, the Republic of North Macedonia, a country with a specific geopolitical and geostrategic position in the Balkan Peninsula centre, is subject to illegal migration. North Macedonia is at the crossroads of migrant routes leading from Asia and Africa to Central and Western Europe. North Macedonia, as a 'heartland' in the Balkans, in addition to being one of the primary traffic and trade crossroads connecting Asia with Europe, is also one of the crossroads of the main routes of terrorism, illegal migration, migrant smuggling, as well as illicit drug trafficking, weapons, and people from Asia and Africa to Western Europe. The number of illegal migrants from these regions has been increasing year by year, culminating during the great migrant crisis in 2015 caused by the war in Syria. Due to poor living conditions and safety risks, many people were forced to leave their countries searching for a better life. After the grand culmination in 2015, until the closure of the Western Balkans route in March 2016, the number of illegal border crossings and the number of asylum seekers in the Western Balkan's subregion countries has decreased. However, let us analyse the statistical indicators. We conclude that this region will continue to face illegal crossings of state borders, use of Balkan routes, and increasing involvement of facilitators of illegal migration, i.e. organised criminal groups and individuals. They use the complicated political, security, and economic position of potential migrants from Asia and Africa, whose trust is gained through illicit property gain in a relatively easy way, which does not require sophistication and high expertise. In 2015, migrant smuggling networks offering facilitation services to reach or move within the EU generated an estimated 4.7 billion EUR to 5.7 billion EUR in profit. These profits have seen a sharp decline

in 2016, dropping by nearly 2 billion EUR between 2015 and 2016. This development is in line with the overall decrease in the number of irregular migrants arriving in the EU and a fall in the prices for migrant smuggling services following the peak of the migration crisis in 2015 (SOCTA, Europol, 50).

Why is it essential to investigate illegal migration and organised crime against migrants? There are many reasons, from threats to personal safety, the risk to the lives of migrants and the lives of the domicile population, or endangering their health. Migrants, using criminal groups' services, can quickly become victims of human trafficking, i.e. labour, sexual or other forms of exploitation, then a violation of human rights and social security. Illegal migration also poses a threat to national security, which primarily reflects on the breach of the state's sovereignty, poses risks to public order, and reflects on the state of crime.

Regarding the terminology used in this research, it is essential to note that different experts, institutions, and organisations use other terms in defining the same phenomena, namely illegal, irregular, and undocumented migration. In our opinion, in this context, it is best to use 'illegal migration' and 'illegal migrant', i.e. the terminology used by the institutions responsible for action, in-laws and regulations, and in the Criminal Code. For illegal migration to occur, it is necessary to have illegal entry and residence in a particular country, i.e. crossing the state border without following the necessary conditions for legal entry into the country of reception. The authors would like to mention that the paper is a shortened and reworked version of the Master's thesis defended at the Saints Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje with the title *The geopolitical context of migrant routes and their influence on organised crime in the Western Balkans, with special reference to the Republic of North Macedonia*.

## **The geopolitical context and importance of migrant routes**

There are a lot of published books and articles related to geopolitics and migration. One of the most appropriate ones is Jennifer Hyndman's reasoning from York University in Canada. She argues that migration has long been a geopolitics barometer, from human displacement generated by war to containment practices in particular territories or camps. Additionally, Hyndman concludes that the meanings of migration and the shifts in dominant geopolitical discourse across space, over time, change dramatically. The securitisation of migration, in particular, is a defining feature of current geopolitics (Hyndman).

Furthermore, Roderick Parkes (2015) from the Swedish Institute of International Affairs has written the report titled *European Union and the geopolitics of migration*. He argues that the Europeans have been encouraged to view migration

as the epitome of globalisation, the triumph of a global economic drive over territorial order. So, it is significant that migration is now becoming an object of geopolitical competition. Across the world, countries are trying to reassert control of their borders and use people flows and differences in population size for geostrategic gain. As the author asked, is this a sign that geography now trumps economics? Instead, it suggests that US-led globalisation, as an organising principle of world politics, is losing its hold. This constatation has triggered competition to promote alternative units and modes of power. As a culturally- and ideologically-loaded form of cross-border interaction, migration has become a powerful vector in this reshuffle.

Many researchers have searched and concluded that recent migration 'crises' raise important geopolitical questions. They also asked – who is 'the migrant' that contemporary politics have fixated on? How are answers to 'who counts as a migrant' changing? Who gets to do that counting, and under what circumstances? Many scientific forums respond to and question the current saliency of migration by examining how categories of migration hold geopolitical significance – not only in how they are constructed and by whom, but also in how they are challenged and subverted. Furthermore, examining how the concepts of 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used in different contexts and for various purposes opens up critical questions about mobility, citizenship, and the nation-state. Collectively, these contributions aim to demonstrate how problematising migration and its categorisation can be a tool for enquiry into other phenomena and processes (William *et al.*).

Contemporary geopolitical research continues to question the importance and effectiveness of categories in seemingly 'ordinary' mobility contexts. For example, migrants' journeys – owing to their fluid, recursive, or largely unpredictable natures – blur the artificially orderly lines among 'origin', 'transit', and 'destination' countries (William *et al.*).

As we try to connect, in this article, the geopolitical context of migrant routes and organised crime with migrant smuggling, we used and accepted some results that Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2013) presented in the book titled *Migrant Smuggling: Irregular Migration from Asia and Africa to Europe*. They argue that international migration has intensified during the last two decades both across the East to West and the South to North axis. Europe has been receiving increasing numbers of migrants from the so-called developing countries in Africa and Asia (and Latin America). As the authors note, part of this international movement of people illegally involves either unlawful border crossings or overstaying (with or without a visa).

Furthermore, the mentioned book looks at one specific aspect of the broader irregular migration phenomenon, notably the organisation and role of migrant smuggling networks in aiding irregular migration from Asia and Africa to southern

Europe (and from southern European countries to the wider EU area). It also discusses how migration control policies in southern European countries may inadvertently shape the migrant smuggling phenomenon and the smuggling 'business' (Triandafyllidou, Maroukis).

In the period of the migrant 'crisis', all inappropriate and criminal activities are accelerating with the changing of important migrant routes that led into the EU countries. The emergence of the Balkan Route in 2015 and its development in 2016 has temporarily shifted the refugee-related migrations' geographical axis, complementing the existing maritime routes in the Mediterranean region with new overland itineraries. This shift has caught unprepared not only the central 'transit countries' and 'arrival countries', but also the EU institutions that until that moment had had a system of control (and reception) in place which was almost exclusively focused on the Mediterranean borders. After being taken by about one million unregistered migrants in 2015, in March 2016, the Balkan Route was officially closed (Umek, Minca and Šantić).

## **How did the importance of migrant routes change?**

Suppose we observe the global map of migrant routes. In that case, we can see several main routes (according to Frontex) for illegal migrants on their way to the European Union: the west African route, the Western Mediterranean route (from the Maghreb to Spain and France), the Central Mediterranean route (from the Libyan and Tunisian coasts to the Apennine Peninsula), the Route through Apulia and Calabria, the Western Balkan route (from Greece, Northern Macedonia, and Serbia, and Croatia), the Eastern Mediterranean route (overseas routes from the Levant to the Greek islands, thence to the Balkan Peninsula), and the (rarely used) route across the eastern borders (from the post-Soviet space) to the major countries of the European Union. The Republic of North Macedonia is part of the so-called 'Western Balkan route'. However, in order to get to the analysis of this route, we need to examine the main routes through which migrants from Asia and Africa could arrive in Europe.

The most important routes are those from the North African coast via the Mediterranean Sea to the "soft" part of the western European part of the 'Rimland' (western, central, and eastern Mediterranean route), as well as the one that goes through the Turkish coast to the Greek islands and from there to the Balkan Peninsula and Central Europe. These are the directions that have a pronounced geopolitical significance and that reflect the vulnerability and porosity of the integrated European south with the European Union with the (not yet integrated into EU) so-called subregion Western Balkans, which, in addition to North Macedonia, also includes Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. This part of the Balkans is at the same time a system of

connected vessels for illegal migration and organised crime with the smuggling of migrants, but also a shield represented by the countries of the Western Balkans for the penetration of illegal migrants to the EU countries.

From a geopolitical perspective, we could analyse how the migrant routes change their importance. In 2015, the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa was one of the most popular routes in Europe. Most migrants using this route were declining from Libya, Tunisia, Eritrea, and other sub-Saharan African countries, attracted to Italy or Malta. In February 2017, the EU should improve its cooperation with the Libyan government and the European border to prevent migration from this country. This decision, already in the middle of the same year, suppressed illegal attempts for one-fifth of another period of 2016. Libya is the main point of departure for Europe, i.e. Italy and Malta, for migrants from Tunisia and Algeria.

The Eastern Mediterranean route runs from Turkey to Greece and is the most exploited route for migrants from Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Somalia. Through the Eastern Mediterranean route, 885,000 people arrived in the EU (17 times more than in 2014). Most of the migrants were refugees from Syria, then Afghanistan, and Somalia, and continued their journey through our country and the Western Balkans route. In 2017 and 2018, the largest number of migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean route was from Syria and Iraq. In March 2016, after the signing of the Agreement between the EU and Turkey, we recorded a sharp decline in illegal migrants along this route, i.e. 41,720 people arrived in Europe, which is 77% less than the previous route.

The Western Mediterranean route stretches from Morocco to Spain, and the closest point to the European soil is only 14 km. The number of illegal migrants, which in 2017 doubled to 23,143, comes mostly from Morocco, Algeria, and the Ivory Coast and heads to Spain, and the trend continued in 2018, with migrants being transported by wooden fishing boats and their number sharply increased by as much as twice, i.e., over 52,000 migrants.

The primary geopolitical importance in the period of the migrant crisis in 2015 is putting on the so-called Western Balkan route. Apart from the official closeness of this route, it is imperative to research the situation and answer the question of whether Western Balkan routes are still alive. Let us avoid the statistical numbers of migrant transition; we shall focus on geopolitical meaning as well as the acceleration of organised crime and smuggling migrants.

After the entry into force of the Agreement between the EU and Turkey in March 2016, the closure of the Western Balkan route expected the number of migrants arriving from Turkey to Greece to be significantly reduced. A joint statement issued by the EU and Turkey read that all irregular migrants returning to Turkey's Greek islands would be returned to Turkey on March 20, 2016. All migrants will be protected following the international standards. In this way, the EU and Turkey sought to reach an agreement on finding a solution to the refugee crisis,

giving Ankara concessions for better relations with the Union. The Agreement provided for the return of all illegal migrants who arrived in Greece from Turkey on March 20. According to political analysts, Turkey has sought unprecedented concessions from the EU (Pachemka 26–42).

Changing EU policies have also forced the closure of borders along the Western Balkans route. The transit of migrants continued through illegal routes with reduced intensity, but with an increased risk of violating persons' freedoms and rights in transit. In the new situation, refugees and migrants were forced to sleep outdoors without access to primary healthcare, at the risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation, or other forms of abuse by organised crime groups involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking. The border's closure found a large number of unaccompanied women and minors along the Western Balkans route. They are a particularly vulnerable category at high risk of becoming victims of human trafficking and various forms of abuse and exploitation. Other refugees and migrants who used the 'services' of smugglers were also at risk of being exploited, extorted, and other forms of abuse and violation of their rights.

The main challenge for the countries along the route was how to provide security and healthcare for people, as well as how to prevent their smuggling or even prevent security issues. For instance, refugees crossing the border into Macedonia legally or illegally pose a severe security threat to Macedonia. The statistics for 2014 show the extent of the problem. That year, the Ministry of Interior Affairs submitted 94 charges against 166 migrant smugglers and received 1,250 applications for asylum. In the clandestine movement of refugees across Macedonia's territory, dozens of migrants have lost their lives on the railways. The human smuggling business poses a further threat, because dangerous persons, including terrorists, may try to take advantage of it. In addition to human smuggling and train accidents, the refugee crisis has involved attacks on the Macedonia police force and attacks on officers in charge of securing the southern border, leading to severe injuries.

For example, on March 14, 2016, 2,445 persons were involved in an attempt at a massive illegal crossing on Greece's border. Three people were killed. The Greek authorities' investigation turned up a leaflet written in Arabic with a map and directions for alternate routes across the Greek-Macedonian border. The investigation is being pursued by the Office of Public Prosecution in Thessaloniki, which seeks to determine whether there is evidence for a case against the persons responsible for this criminal network that organises the entry of migrants from Greece while possibly endangering Greece's foreign relations with its neighbours. To enhance security, a double wire fence approximately thirty-kilometres-long was installed on the state border with Macedonia on both sides of Border Stone 59. Migrants desperate to pass into Macedonia and Western Europe reacted with violence, stoning the police and the army. Twenty-four persons were injured, among whom twenty-three were security officers. Public



peace and order was disrupted in another attack on security forces on February 29, 2016, at Border Stone 59, during which stones and other hard objects were hurled at the Macedonian police forces, injuring one officer. Greek authorities responded by releasing approximately five hundred migrants (Mileski).

Security aspects are also elaborated on in the scientific literature. We will note one of them, namely one related to the so-called ‘proxy war’ on refugees. Helen Hintjens and Ali Bilgic researched that aspect and noted that for decades, European Union (EU) member states had fought an illegal proxy war – a form of state crime – against refugees and migrants, far beyond EU external borders. Fatalities make this proxy war equivalent to international classifications of war. To justify this war, migrants have progressively been reclassified by the EU as “illegal” or criminal. These authors’ article situates the proxy war within broader deterrence-based EU migration policies. Examples such as the 2008–2009 Italy–Libya deal and the 2016 EU–Turkey deal show the high price paid by refugees and minorities, and the damage to the EU’s stability and reputation. Forcibly confining people at “holding points” along migratory routes, expelling people to unsafe countries, and raising barriers to legal movement, the proxy war’s violence became more visible in 2015. Hintjens and Bilgic (2019) conclude that far from counteracting the dynamics of mass displacement, the proxy war may have contributed to the recent refugee reception crisis in Europe.

## **Smuggling migrants – the new imperative of organised criminal groups**

That smuggling ‘business’ as a part of organised crime is a high security risk for current states. Väyrynen (2003) argued that many of the smugglers’ routes and enclaves have become institutionalised; for instance, from Mexico and Central America to the United States, from West Asia through Greece and Turkey to Western Europe, and within East and Southeast Asia. More often than not, flourishing smuggling routes are made possible by weak legislation, lax border controls, corrupted police officers, and the power of organised crime. Naturally, poverty and warfare contribute to the rising tide of migration, both legal and illegal. In general, illegal migration seems to be increasing due to the strict border controls combined with the expansion of the areas of free mobility, such as the Schengen area, and the growing demographic imbalance in the world. The more closed the borders and the more attractive the target countries, the greater the share of human trafficking in illegal migration and the role of national and transnational organised crime. Criminal groups’ involvement in migration means that smuggling leads to trafficking and victimisation as well as to the violation of human rights, including prostitution and slavery.

National legislation in the Republic of North Macedonia provides penalties for activities related to the state border's illegal crossing. Article 402 provides penalties for the unlawful crossing of the state border; Article 418-b – for migrant smuggling; and Article 418-v – for organising a group and encouraging the perpetration of human trafficking, trafficking of minors, and migrant smuggling (Кривичен Законик [Criminal Code] 171). During 2014–2015, the government placed 429 criminal charges of 'migrant smuggling' against 398 offenders (Ministry of Interior). Human smuggling into Macedonia has gone through changes since 2009. Between 2009 and 2011, the smuggling organisers were Macedonian citizens who cooperated with criminal groups from Greece and Serbia. Since the beginning of 2012, human smuggling has been managed principally by organised criminal groups from Afghanistan and Pakistan which operate from Turkey and Greece. These new groups manage the complete smuggling route, from the country of origin to the country of destination. The Afghans and Pakistanis who manage these networks arrived earlier in Macedonia as irregular migrants and asylum seekers, and established contacts with Macedonian nationals. They work principally in Skopje and the Kumanovo region (Vaksince and Lojane). They have recruited people in Gevgelija to accept the migrants from Greece and transport them to Vaksince and Lojane, where they can then be transferred to Serbia. Smuggling is carried out in groups of ten to fifteen migrants. Each group has a guide from the criminal network, which leads them from Greece to Macedonia. The transportation cost of illegal migrants through Macedonia is between one thousand and fifteen hundred euros per migrant. Payments are carried out through rapid electronic payments.

From November 2015 until the present, criminal groups that smuggle irregular migrants have been active in Macedonia. Besides the Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis, who generally have good cases for asylum, other migrants have arrived who will not be able to apply for asylum. Their origin countries include Iran, Pakistan, Morocco, Bangladesh, Liberia, Sudan, Algeria, Congo, and others. During 2015, i.e. the peak of the refugee crisis, most migrants seeking to cross into Macedonia were from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Pakistan. Their route began with crossing the Greek-Macedonian border and went from there to the Gevgelija-Demir Kapija region and on to Skopje and Kumanovo. From there, they entered Serbia for the journey to Western Europe. Former President Gjorge Ivanov of Macedonia has noted that smugglers earned about six billion euros in 2015. He discussed clandestine human smuggling in his opening speech on March 21, 2016, at a scientific conference titled 'The Geopolitical and Geostrategic Position of the Republic of Macedonia amid the Migrant and Refugee Crisis'. The interdiction of migrant smuggling is conducted by the criminal police, customs officers, the Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence, the Intelligence Agency, and other police agencies. Greater collaboration, particularly in the gathering

of intelligence information and undercover policing, has enhanced police effectiveness, as have new methods of photo-documentation and other special investigative measures. New technology has been introduced, such as heat sensors that can be placed at borders to respond to the heat of the human body and scanners that detect cars and trucks that can provide evidence of the irregular transport of migrants (Камбовски, Мирчев, Мемеди).

Despite these efforts and the signing of an agreement between the European Union and Turkey to suppress migration to Europe, the refugee wave to Europe may diminish, but it will persist, because the ongoing conflicts in Syria and other countries have not been resolved. Irregular migrants will continue to be at risk for abuse and victimisation, including robbery, kidnapping, assault, and rape. To move forward, it is vital that improvements be made to strengthen the agency and interagency cooperation through regular meetings at the local, regional, and national levels with the border guard services of neighbouring countries, regular participation in joint operational activities organised by Frontex in the Republic of Macedonia and abroad, the development and maintenance of bilateral police cooperation with competent authorities of the member states of the European Union and countries in the region, as well as cooperation with the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, and other international organisations and forums as well as NGOs that deal with irregular migration (Mileski).

## **The COVID-19 pandemic era of smuggling migrants**

Academic literature has a significant effort to make a nexus between the COVID-19 pandemic era and smuggling migrants. For instance, Gabriela Sanchez and Luigi Achili (2020) argue that official state responses to the COVID-19 crisis have increased the level of insecurity among irregular migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in transit. The measures, by imposing controls on migration management, including detention and border and port closures, have contributed to migrants being left without international assistance. At the same time, the demand for migrant smuggling continued with a slightly reduced intensity. After border closures, human trafficking, smuggling, and international criminal networks frequently arise. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the number of smuggled individuals and human trafficking victims continued to rise (Ullah *et al.*).

In the pandemic era, migrant movements and attempts at illegal crossings along the Western Balkans route and the new sub-route through Albania-Bosna and Hercegovina-Croatia-Slovenia will continue in 2020. In the past period, over 110,000 illegal crossings were registered on this route despite the unique situation

with COVID-19. Generally, despite the short time distance from the adopted restrictive government measures, it is difficult to identify some general trends and assess the impact of COVID-19. However, of course, there is a passivation of the activities of organised crime groups involved in migrant smuggling in the short run. The criminal activities of profiled organised criminal groups, since the declaration of a state of emergency in March 2020, have significantly decreased. For these conditions, there are several authors' assumptions arising from conversations and internal reports with persons directly in charge of dealing with migrant smuggling:

- The fear is evident among the organisers and members of the organised criminal groups (OCG) of the possibility of being infected with COVID-19 themselves, given that a large number of illegal migrants in Greece may have the virus;
- Closing the borders and banning the movement of citizens through the official border crossings reduced the number of detected cases of illegal migrants through the territory of North Macedonia;
- There is a real danger of their detection by the security services (especially with the engagement of the army) when trying to cross the state border illegally, carrying a large amount of money with them;
- The global recession as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on migration processes and flows. Economic factors play an essential role in determining migration movements and will be a vital push factor in the coming period. The contact of illegal migrants who are potentially infected or transmitters of the virus is an excellent danger, because on their way to the final destination-EU they are in connection with a large number of people-facilitators of illegal migration;
- It is evident that irregular migrants are still being detected (albeit in much smaller numbers due to the enormously strengthened measures taken by the Greek police to prevent the illegal entry of migrants from Turkey to Greece), so there is some sort of control over which migrants are trying to obtain illegal entry into the territory of North Macedonia;
- From January 1 to August 20, 2020, they increased by 33.1% compared to the same period last year. 19.879 attempts were prevented, unlike the same period the previous year, when 14.933 attempts were thwarted. It is important to note that the number of detected migrants increased significantly during the winter period (January and February 2020), when Turkey decided to open its borders to migrants to Greece;
- Analysing the data weekly, it can be noticed that, on average, when trying to enter or leave the country, about 585 migrants are detected, or 85 people daily, and it is essential to note that during July the daily average of prevented

attempts reaches 150 people and in almost the same number continues during August 2020;

- As for the structure of migrants, this year the most numerous migrants come from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Libya, Palestine, Turkey, Egypt, Somalia, Morocco, Cuba, and Algeria. According to the gender structure, 90% of the detected persons are male, and according to the age limit, it is a young population aged between 18 and 25 years old.

## **Results in the fight against smuggling with migrants and human trafficking for the period 2016–2019**

In the past period, the Republic of North Macedonia took significant measures aimed at strengthening the capacity to deal with migrant smuggling and human trafficking. A significant number of cases of human trafficking and smuggling of migrants have been uncovered, with many of these cases ending in convictions. However, the activities of organised crime groups involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking continue. In the annual reports of the State Department for Human Trafficking for 2016, 2017, and 2018, North Macedonia is in the second rank of countries, i.e. it is noted that the government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking (US Department of State).

We could conclude that this is a clear indicator that the institutions in North Macedonia that are fighting against illegal migration have a positive approach and are appropriately targeted.

As part of this research, a survey was conducted on police officers working to combat illegal migration and organised crime. The survey was conducted on 102 respondents from the Ministry of Interior. That covers police officers working in the regional centres for border affairs, investigators in the National Unit for Combating Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking, organised crime analysts, organised crime inspectors, and liaison officers for international police cooperation, heads of the above-mentioned organisational units, advisors, and uniformed police officers in the border police. As to the gender structure, the surveys were conducted with 85 male police officers and 22 female police officers.

- When asked about the most common reasons for which migrants from the Middle East and African countries leave their countries, most of the respondents answered that the most common reason includes military and conflict areas. The second most common one includes the unfavourable economic situation in their countries of origin.
- When asked about the impact of the political and security situation in the countries of origin of migrants (the Middle East and North Africa) on the routes used by migrants to reach EU countries, most of the respondents

agreed that the impact is significant, and only 26% said that it is a crucial influence.

- Because many respondents have direct contact with illegal migrants detected in our country, the most significant percentage of them said that in interviews with migrants, they say they are fleeing war zones. Only 20% say they come from economically-underdeveloped areas or countries where they have previously sought refuge.
- Asked whether migration processes encourage criminals to target their criminal activities to facilitate illegal migration, the answer is yes in 95% of the responses.
- The same answer (very high) is given to the question of the impact of migration routes on the activities of organised criminal groups on the territory of our country and the Western Balkans.
- When asked which of the state bodies they think the Ministry of Interior should cooperate with in dealing with migrant smuggling effectively, the largest percentage of the respondents said that cooperation with the Public Prosecutor's Office is crucial, followed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, citizens' associations, Customs Administration, and so on.
- When asked about the cooperation or the need to strengthen cooperation with the police of neighbouring countries in the fight against migrant smuggling, half of the respondents answered that it is satisfactory, 21% that it is unsatisfactory, and 20% that it is excellent (this is due to the positive answers of police officers from the Regional Center East because of the positive experience they have with the Bulgarian police).
- Regarding the respondents' perception of the attitude of the domicile population towards the phenomenon of migrant smuggling, the survey results partially confirmed the hypothesis that the population has a negative attitude towards this phenomenon, but still considers it an easy way to gain illegal property (Pachemska 96–104).

To test the results of the conducted survey, and to confirm or reject the hypotheses of this research, an additional qualitative research method was applied, namely an in-depth interview with the head of the National Unit for Combating Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in the Republic of North Macedonia, which resulted in the following key findings, which support the answers given in the survey questionnaire previously:

- The most common reason for migrants to leave their countries is military action or economic reasons as well as a larger plan to change the demographic situation in Europe and its economic weakening, which is one of the reasons why the United Kingdom “timely” leaves the EU.
- The political and security situation in the countries of origin of migrants (the Middle East and North Africa) has a significant impact on the routes

used by migrants to reach EU countries. The most commonly used routes established in previous decades were those through which various excise goods were smuggled, but mostly drugs.

- Routes through unsafe countries are avoided (hostilities, political and social unrest, tribal wars), because it is effortless for refugee or economic migrants to be exploited in various ways, making them victims of human trafficking.
- The influence of socio-economic factors from the interviews conducted with the detected irregular “economic” migrants is excellent, because everyone states that they come to Europe for a secure life and work, the opportunity for better education, better access, and better health services.
- Questions remain about the funding given to migrants by organised criminal groups for their smuggling to Western European countries, i.e. where these funds come from, given that migrants come from extremely poor and economically-underdeveloped countries, who provides these funds for so many people, what happens to migrants when they arrive in the country of final destination, how they pay their debts, and what the real goal is.
- Illegal migrants transiting through our country are people fleeing conflict areas. These people have previously stayed in reception centres in other countries where they have sought asylum (and which by international standards are considered safe countries), as well as people from economically-underdeveloped countries looking for work or opportunities for better education, better access to better health services, but also members of terrorist organisations or foreign armies tasked with setting up the so-called “cells” in Western Europe to recruit people for ‘Jihad’ and carrying out terrorist attacks.
- The impact of migrant routes affects the activities of organised criminal groups on the territory of North Macedonia and the Western Balkans, i.e. many of the organised criminal groups that were targeted to commit a certain type of crime are reoriented to commit criminal activities related to smuggling of migrants or simply become poly criminal organised groups who see migrant smuggling as an easy way to earn money.
- Cooperation with neighbouring police services is at a satisfactory level, traditionally best with Serbia colleagues. There is almost none cooperation with colleagues from Greece, who have no interest (political willing) to prosecute the organisers and members of the organised criminal groups who smuggle migrants from Greece.
- The mode of action of the organised criminal groups has an impact on the creation of effective and efficient policies of the institutions involved in the fight against the smuggling of migrants; the modes used by the OCG should be monitored and analysed, as well as new trends in their action.

Appropriate strategy, including an action plan for an effective institutional response to this type of crime, should be worked out.

- The suppression of organised criminal groups does not only mean the deprivation of liberty of persons suspected of being involved in illegal activities related to the smuggling of migrants, but it also means the conduct of a complete and thorough financial investigation into the illegally acquired property (movable or immovable, cash) and its confiscation.
- The closure of an active route will reflect an increase or decrease in the number of migrants who will use the Western Balkan route, which passes through the countries that are part of the Western Balkan route. Let us take into account that the measures taken by France since early 2019, Spain, and Italy reduced over 50% of attempts to enter their territories illegally via the Western Mediterranean and Central Mediterranean routes, while at the same time increasing the influx by 120% via the Eastern Mediterranean route (Cyprus and Greece). The answer is more than evident. Also, migrants from Angola and Morocco were detected in North Macedonia.
- The geopolitical situation in the region has influenced and will continue to affect the routes of movement of irregular migrants and the irregular migration itself. In this context, the geopolitical position of North Macedonia in the Balkans – as a significant crossroads through which the main trade routes have passed for centuries, and later routes for smuggling various goods and, more recently, migrants – defines the inevitability of facing irregular migration and the need to deal with it.
- The fact that no country alone can effectively combat this kind of international criminality and that everyone stresses the need for regional cooperation between the countries directly addresses the necessity of strong political will. Any change in the political attitude or the existence of a political crisis in a country directly impacts irregular migration.

## Conclusion

This research's initial idea was a theoretically elaborated geopolitical context and importance of the migrant routes, focusing on the Balkan route upgraded with theoretical and empirical research (survey and in-depth interview) about organised crime with migrant smuggling. Our goal was to prove the research question and the application of scientific research methodology, all supported by quantitative and qualitative methods, analysis of written documents, and use of open sources of information. Practically, all results are based on daily monitoring of the situation in the Republic of North Macedonia.



The key findings in the research – through surveying police officers working on this issue and then an interview with the head of the newly formed National Unit for Combating Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking, as well as an in-depth analysis of previous research in our country and reports of relevant domestic and international researchers and institutions – have shown that the geopolitical context of migrant routes affects organised crime in the Western Balkans. Consequently, the situation in the Republic of North Macedonia was marked as very critical in the field of increasing migrant smuggling, which is the central hypothesis on which this research is based. Let us take into account all previously mentioned findings. We can conclude that quantitative and qualitative scientific research methods applied in this paper confirm the research questions, or that the geopolitical context of migrant routes impacts organised crime in subregion countries in the Western Balkans, and thus over North Macedonia. For instance, this statement correlates with the respondents' answers in the questionnaire. The situation in the Middle East, i.e. the military conflicts that affect these regions, impacts the geopolitical relations and routes taken by migrants to reach European Union countries. The political and security situation in the countries of origin of migrants has the most significant impact, and the second factor is socio-economic one.

The fight against migrant smuggling is one of the European Union's priorities, based on the Europol's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA). The severe approach of North Macedonia can be seen from the Ministry of Interior's active participation in various initiatives dedicated to combating this crime. The establishment of the National Unit for the Suppression of Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings is proof of how serious law enforcement institutions' approach is in dealing with organised crime against migrants.

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