

CERTAIN ASPECTS OF POLICE WORK IN COUNTERING IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND PEOPLE SMUGGLING

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INTRODUCTION

Countering cross-border crime and irregular migrations is one of the areas of work for the border police. Irregular migrations can be defined as any movement of the population from one country to another that is not in accordance with the applicable legal regulations of the country of origin and the country of destination (Dostić, 2022). Within the Directorate of Border Police, a department with four sections has been established that, among other things, deals with this type of police work. They also gain importance at the regional level because Serbia borders four EU countries, two of which are in the Schengen area (Hungary and Croatia), and the territory of Serbia is located on major smuggling routes from Asia to Western and Central Europe. The issue of irregular migrations is also influenced by the decisions of EU countries and those along the migration route. In this regard, the different approaches of EU member states to irregular migrations, or the lack of a unified migration policy, directly affect the state of migration and, consequently, the situation in individual countries along the migration route (Bergesio, Bialasiewicz, 2023; Koroutchev, Peev, 2022; Ilievski, Tasev, 2019). Hungary is the first country in the region to implement comprehensive legal and technical measures to prevent irregular migrations across its state border. It has erected physical barriers on the external borders of the Schengen area, implemented adequate legal measures, and tightened criminal legislation in the field of migrant smuggling (Böröcz, 2021). In 2015, the Hungarian government issued a decree declaring Serbia a safe third country. According to this decree, if asylum-seeking migrants are found on Hungarian soil after entering from Serbia, and their asylum request is denied, they can be deported back to the country from which they entered. From available public sources, it can be concluded that in 2022 alone and the first 10 months of 2023, over 250,000 migrants were returned to Serbia from Hungary through transit gates. In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Hungary had violated human rights as established by Article 3 – prohibition of torture – of the European Convention on Human Rights but did not violate Article 5 of the same convention – right to liberty and security. The court noted that before returning the two migrants, Hungary did not assess whether the asylum seekers would have access to appropriate asylum procedures if returned to Serbia and whether Serbia would respect the principle of non-refoulement, considering that they could freely return to a third country from which they came without any threat to their life or health (Case of Ilias and Ahmed v. Hungary App. no. 47287/15).

In Serbia, the legislative penal policy has also been tightened. For migrant smuggling, the prescribed prison sentence is from 1 to 8 years, and if the crime is committed by a criminal group, the sentence is from 2 to 12 years, or if by an organized criminal group (OCG), from 3 to 15 years (Criminal Code, Article 350, paragraphs 3 and 4). A decision has been made to erect physical barriers along parts of the border with Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The border police primarily direct their activities in coun-

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tering cross-border crime towards suppressing crimes related to human smuggling, illegal drug trafficking, and arms trafficking. However, since the border police are not responsible for investigating and proving these crimes, after identifying the perpetrator and taking them into custody, they hand over the case to the criminal police for further investigation and jurisdiction. The competent public prosecutor is informed and directs further actions to secure evidence for filing charges. A significant part of the border police's activities also involves gathering and sharing intelligence in these areas, and it is unimaginable to combat cross-border crime without the participation of the border police (Marković, 2023a). Following the events that occurred in late October 2023 in Horgos, near the Serbian-Hungarian border, where an armed conflict between two groups of irregular migrants resulted in the deaths of three Afghan nationals, one injury, and the arrest of four Afghan nationals and two Turkish nationals, and when the police search of the area and surrounding woods uncovered two automatic rifles with dozens of rounds of ammunition, the Serbian police changed their strategy for countering irregular migrations. A forward command post was established in Subotica, with several hundred members of various police organizational units (Gendarmerie, Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, border police, traffic police, criminal police, general jurisdiction police, etc.) deployed in the area. With the extensive use of drones for monitoring the state border, irregular migrations have almost been stopped.

The purpose of this paper is to present the new strategic approach of the Serbian border police in countering irregular migration and human smuggling.

ORGANIZATION AND OPERATIONS OF THE BORDER POLICE

From 2005 to 2007, the Serbian police completely took over border control from the military, after which civil protection of state border security was implemented. Since the implementation of the Police Law in 2005, the adoption of a new organization, and the formation of the Police Directorate in 2006, the Border Police Directorate has functioned as a unique and centralized organizational unit of the Police Directorate at the headquarters, hierarchically organized at the central, regional, and local levels. *The Police Law* (2016), like the previous one, defines the organization of the Police Directorate, determining the organizational units at the headquarters and outside the headquarters. Despite the fact that the Border Police Directorate is at the headquarters, unlike the Police Directorate and the Traffic Police Directorate, it is organized at the regional and local levels, in a similar way to the Police Directorate. Instead of regional police departments and police stations, centers and stations were formed. At the central level, 5 departments and the Office for Asylum were established, at the regional level, 8 regional centers, and at the local level, 40 border police stations. The entire organization is managed in a pyramidal system from a single point, by the head of the Directorate (Marković, 2023).

The border police perform tasks related to border control, suppression of cross-border crime, movement and stay of foreigners, suppression of irregular migrations, asylum, control of legality in work, and logistics. *The Law on Border Control* stipulates that border control includes the tasks of state border supervision, border checks, and risk analysis of border security threats. The purposes of performing border control are: ensuring state border security; protecting the lives and health of people and the environment; preventing, detecting, and clarifying criminal acts and misdemeanors; preventing irregular migrations; and preventing and detecting other activities and actions that disturb public order and peace, the legal system, and public safety. Border surveillance represents a set of authorities, actions, and measures conducted along the state border, between border crossings, and at border crossings outside of established working hours. Its aim is to combat cross-border crime, prevent illegal border crossings,



protect the border's inviolability, control border authorizations, and take measures, actions, and enforce authorities against persons who have illegally crossed the state border or misused border authorizations.

Border checks include controlling persons and travel documents, vehicles, and items that border police officers perform within the area of the border crossing during its established working hours. Additional border checks can be carried out at a second-line area, i.e., outside the designated place for border checks. The second-line check includes actions that can be performed at a specially designated place at the border crossing, which is not where the border check of all persons is conducted. We distinguish between basic and detailed border checks. A detailed border check is conducted for persons for whom there are grounds for suspicion that they may endanger the security of the state border, public safety, public order, or public health, or that they will misuse their stay in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. For security reasons, a detailed border check can be conducted for all persons crossing the state border. If it is conducted at the second-line check, individuals are informed of the reasons for the check. Among other things, a detailed border check ensures that the person, their vehicle, and the items they carry will not endanger the security of the state border, public order, or public health. It also includes checking data on warnings issued for persons and items in records maintained by relevant state authorities and international organizations, as well as taking actions based on those warnings.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICE-INTELLIGENCE MODEL IN BORDER POLICE

The Law on Police (Official Gazette of RS, 6/2016) foresees a large number of measures and actions that police officers can use in order to prevent crime (Vuković, 2017, p. 219). Police work often involves encountering unforeseen circumstances that require a quick response (Marković, 2014). In the last two decades, police work in the area of countering cross-border crime has undergone significant changes. The police are a state body that has a repressive role primarily (Marković, Kolarić, 2024). The traditional method of police work, which involves reactive action, from the committed crime to the perpetrator, has long been dominant. The preventive role, often emphasized in theory and highlighted in legal and by-law regulations, has secondary importance because there are no reliable parameters for measuring its success (Marković, Kolarić, 2024). In recent years, a proactive approach has become the standard. The police, by acting against repeat offenders, monitoring hotspots, and overseeing tools and objects made or modified for committing crimes, attempt to prevent the commission of crimes.

Crime investigation strategy, in the broadest sense, implies the operationalization of crime policy concepts of suppressing crime generally or countering certain forms of crime in the national territory or at the regional level by applying the crime countering agents who apply strategic measures (Marković, Kolarić, 2023). The police-intelligence model (intelligence-led policing) is recognized as the leading approach in most European countries. Following the recommendations for its implementation by the European Union in Chapter 24, it was introduced into the work of the Serbian police through the Police Law (2016) (Kolarić, Marković, 2016; Marković, 2016; Marković, 2022). Decisions are made based on criminal intelligence information. Repeat offenders are targeted, and through the analysis of their criminal activities, crimes that have been committed or were intended to be committed are identified (Marković, 2019a). The criminal intelligence cycle is a process of developing and transforming raw information and data into actionable intelligence, which is delivered in a format suitable for use by authorized police officials. It involves the submission of requests, process planning, data collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence (Marković, 2019). It begins with identifying the needs of authorized managers in the police organization. Based on these requests, planning and



direction are carried out to effectively manage the entire cycle. The next step is the collection and acquisition of information and data from various sources. This is followed by processing and exploitation, i.e., transforming the vast amount of collected data into a form usable by analysts. The next phase involves the analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of available knowledge to obtain intelligence with the aim of preparing finished criminal intelligence products. Finally, in the dissemination phase, the intelligence products reach the requester who initiated the cycle. Often, “soft” criminal intelligence products, stripped of confidential or operational information, are made available to the public to raise awareness and stimulate resilience against identified criminal threats (a public version of the document is published) (Marković, 2023).

The Head of Border Police Directorate leads the operational management group and is authorized to make decisions. All heads of organizational units directly subordinate to him attend the group meetings, with regional center chiefs most often attending online due to the distance of their workplaces. The Head of Border Police Directorate submits a request to the organizational unit responsible for risk analysis (Department for Integrated Border Management and Risk Analysis) to address a specific security issue.

Risk analysis is a working method used to identify risks and threats based on available information, providing the Head of Border Police Directorate with a basis for decision-making. The analysis of border security risks must rely on the efficient and rapid collection and exchange of all relevant data and information. Threat and risk assessments begin with evaluating the nature and scale of specific threats. It should also measure the likelihood of the threat occurring and the potential harm it could cause (Marković, 2019). The method of conducting risk analysis is defined by the Common Integrated Risk Analysis Model (CIRAM 2.0), a methodology developed by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency – Frontex, and is also a requirement under European legal regulations. Within the organizational unit that handles this type of work, collected data is processed and analyzed to create a final product in a format suitable for decision-making. The data is collected by police officers from all organizational units of the Border Police Directorate, primarily by border police stations established to perform state border surveillance and conduct border checks at border crossings. Police officers enter the collected data in the form of an operational report into the electronic system. In the Serbian police, a system has been established in which, after the submission of an operational report, there is a chain of five levels of decision-making. The first level is the verifier – the authorized immediate supervisor (station commander) who has the right and duty to verify the operational report. He can make three decisions: he can return the report to the submitter for supplementation, reject it as not of security interest, or forward it to a lower administrator (usually the head of criminal analysis). He does not decide who will work on the report. The lower administrator is the second level of decision-making. When he receives the operational report for decision-making, the personal data of the submitter are not available to him, only the data of the organizational unit that submitted the report. The lower administrator – the head of the regional border police center – checks the report through operational databases and can supplement it. He usually decides who will handle the operational report if the case is handled at the regional center level, or he can forward it to a higher supervisor – the Head of Border Police Directorate – to make a decision (Marković, 2019). If it is necessary to assign the case to another organizational unit, the report is forwarded to operational analytics – an organizational unit in the Criminal Police Directorate that will decide to whom the case will be assigned. Exceptionally, in rare situations, complex cases may be referred to the Director of Police for a decision.

After receiving the finished intelligence product, which is created by the risk analysis unit in cooperation with the department responsible for countering cross-border crime (Department for Countering Cross-Border Crime and Irregular Migrations), a decision is made to implement specific operational



tasks. For example, this could include detailed border control of certain freight vehicles at specific border crossings (exit or entry) to combat the smuggling of irregular migrants.

COUNTERING THE SMUGGLING OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS

In the Strategic Public Safety Assessment for the period 2022–2025, preventing and countering irregular migration is defined as a strategic priority for the Serbian police and is assessed to pose a moderate risk to public safety. The third strategic document in the field of countering organized crime, the Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), was adopted in Serbia in 2023. Human smuggling is identified as one of the areas of crime whose suppression is a strategic priority for the Serbian police. At the time of adopting SOCTA in Serbia, the police had registered 12 organized crime groups (OCGs), with migrant smuggling, along with the illegal trade and smuggling of narcotic drugs and weapons, being one of the most common areas of criminal activity they engage in. High profits and the inability to migrate legally from Asia to Europe have led to an increasing number of organized crime groups (OCGs) engaging in this type of crime. They are hierarchically structured, pyramid-shaped organizations that employ a medium level of leader protection and a high level of internal discipline. They are connected with similar OCGs across Europe, especially those operating in the Western Balkans. Their significant financial power and high level of corruption influence over government officials in the judiciary, customs, tax police, and law enforcement, along with the engagement of top lawyers with strong contacts, the use of encrypted channels and social media platforms, and the anonymity of cryptocurrency transactions, allow them a high degree of protection for their criminal activities and the investment of profits (“laundered money”) into legal businesses. The border police are not isolated from this issue, so smuggling is carried out in a certain percentage of cases with the help of “dirty” border police officers. There is a significant danger that among the irregular migrants smuggled by OCGs, terrorists could infiltrate, posing a security challenge for the security services (Janković & Todorović, 2017).

At the beginning of 2018, the tasks of countering human smuggling were transferred from the jurisdiction of the border police to the jurisdiction of the criminal police. This was the only criminal offense in the field of smuggling that the border police independently detected, investigated, and proved. Meanwhile, the tasks of countering irregular migration remained under the jurisdiction of the border police. Considering that these two types of tasks require joint action and the mutual exchange of collected intelligence data, a high level of coordination and cooperation between the border police and the criminal police is necessary to increase work efficiency. It is impossible to imagine mass irregular migrations without the involvement of smugglers. Criminal groups exploit migrants’ lack of knowledge of regional conditions and terrain to enable their passage from state to state through illegal smuggling channels for high profit. Therefore, these two areas of police work cannot be carried out separately. Irregular migrations cannot be prevented if human smuggling is not simultaneously addressed. Irregular migrants most often cross state borders on foot, often in larger groups, at locations outside border crossings, avoiding border police officers who monitor the state border. These groups are organized by smugglers, who, for a certain amount of money, provide information about suitable border crossing points, the times when the risk of detection is lowest, and often hire locals to guide migrant groups for a fee (Whittle, Antonopoulos, 2022). The Serbian border police have prevented this method of border crossing in many cases on the borders with Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

In its operations, the border police have established an “early warning” system. An agreement signed between the police, customs, and inspection services, along with a protocol that more closely defines



the exchange of information, regulates the joint creation of risk analyses and the preparation and exchange of early warning information to enhance the efficiency of integrated border management (Marković, 2023). The “early warning” system also operates between the border police of other European countries, ensuring that all security services are promptly informed about newly detected smuggling methods. For example, in recent years, a new *modus operandi* has been observed, involving the high-risk hiding of illegal migrants in motor vehicles (in the technical space between the engine and the hood). This method is extremely dangerous to the lives of irregular migrants. At the beginning of 2016, within the European Police Office, the Europol Migrant Smuggling Center (EMSC) was established. One of its tasks is to facilitate the exchange of information and early warnings regarding migrant smuggling methods among member states.

In the first half of 2024, the Western Balkan route was almost halted due to the implementation of new police tactics. In Serbia, 108,808 migrants were recorded in reception and asylum centers in 2023, 12 percent less than in 2022, according to the annual report of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration published on January 23. The majority of migrants were from Syria and Afghanistan, accounting for 70% of the total, followed by Pakistan and Morocco (The Government of the Republic of Serbia). According to available data for the period of January–February 2024, compared to the same period in 2023, the number of migrants on the Western Balkan route has decreased by approximately 65% (Frontex, 2024). According to data from the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, a total of 830 irregular migrants were housed in 6 asylum centers and 10 reception centers (KIRS, 2024) in April 2024, which is significantly less than in the period before the establishment of forward command posts. However, in May 2024, there was a 29% increase in the number of migrants, with 1,073 recorded (IOM, 2024).

In the first five months of 2024, a total of 7,261 irregular migrants were recorded, with the majority still being from Syria and Afghanistan, around 55%, which is three and a half times less compared to the previous year. The reception centers used to accommodate migrants are almost empty, and the decreasing trend remains evident on a daily basis. The strategic approach of the police and the implementation of an adequate criminal strategy in this area of police work have yielded excellent results: efficiency, effectiveness, and economy have been achieved. These indicators suggest that irregular migration and smuggling routes have been minimized across the territory of Serbia with the use of minimal material and human resources and the application of modern technical means, primarily drones and thermal imaging (Janković et al., 2024).

Table 1. *Perpetrators of the Criminal Offense of Human Smuggling Under Article 350 of the Criminal Code in the Period 2018–2022.*

Criminal offense	Accused persons	Convicted persons	Prison sentence	House arrest	Probation
Art. 350, para. 2	402	377	123	104	148
Art. 350, para. 3	475	385	207	160	15
Art. 350, para. 4	73	72	71	1	
Total	950	834	401	265	163

The Criminal Code criminalizes the offense of illegal crossing of the state border and human smuggling in Article 350. This offense essentially consists of two independent criminal acts related to the illegal crossing of the state border (Đorđević, Kolarić, 2020: 238). The first pertains to the illegal crossing or attempted crossing of the state border. To commit this form of criminal offense, it is necessary



that the border crossing is illegal and that the perpetrator is armed and/or has used violence. If the second condition is not met, it will be classified as a misdemeanor. The penalty is imprisonment for up to 1 year. In the period from 2018 to 2022, for this form of criminal offense, 34 individuals were charged, and 28 were convicted, with 12 sentenced to imprisonment, 6 to house arrest, 9 to probation, and 1 to a fine. The second criminal offense pertains to human smuggling and consists of three forms. The first form of human smuggling is committed by enabling a person to illegally cross the border of Serbia, to reside illegally, or to transit through Serbia. It is necessary that the perpetrator has the intention to gain some benefit for themselves or another person. In the same period, 402 individuals were charged, and 377 were convicted. The majority were sentenced to probation (39%), followed by imprisonment (33%) and house arrest (28%). Additionally, one individual was given a fine as the main sentence, one was sentenced to community service, and one was found guilty but exempted from punishment. The qualified form of this criminal offense, as defined in paragraph 2, occurs if a larger number of persons are smuggled, if the act is committed by a group, if it involves the abuse of official position, or if it is carried out in a manner that endangers the life or health of the person whose illegal crossing of the Serbian border, stay, or transit through Serbia is facilitated. This more severe form of human smuggling is defined in paragraph 3 of Article 350 of the Criminal Code. During the analyzed period, a total of 475 individuals were charged, and 385 were convicted. Most of the convicted were sentenced to imprisonment, accounting for 54%, followed by house arrest at 42%, and only 4% received probation. Three individuals were sentenced to educational measures. The most severe qualified form is committed when human smuggling is carried out by an organized criminal group, for which a high penalty is prescribed; the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment from three to fifteen years. For this form of criminal offense, 73 individuals were charged, and 72 were convicted, 71 of whom were sentenced to imprisonment and one to house arrest. As many as 67 perpetrators were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 2 to 10 years. Of the total 834 convicted individuals, 108, or 13%, were foreign nationals.

CONCLUSION

Irregular migration continues to capture significant attention from the international community. Millions of residents of Asia and Africa have been displaced from the countries where they were born and where their centers of life activities were located. The majority attempt to reach economically developed European countries through smuggling routes in search of better living conditions. The Western Balkan route remains relevant as it is the shortest path from war-torn areas, primarily Syria, to Western Europe. Some of the smuggling routes pass through Serbia. Entry and transit through Serbian territory most often occur via routes crossing the state border with North Macedonia and Bulgaria, with exits across the state border with Hungary and Croatia. Annually, several hundred thousand irregular migrants pass through these smuggling routes. Only a portion stays in reception and asylum centers for a short period until they organize for further travel. In 2023, only 196 asylum requests were submitted in Serbia, 319 in 2022, 172 in 2021, and 145 in 2020 (MUP, 2024). This confirms that Serbia is merely a transit area for irregular migration.

The smuggling of irregular migrants is one of the main criminal activities conducted by criminal groups and organized crime groups. The penalties for this criminal offense are lower compared to drug trafficking, while the profits are high. Our research shows that over five years, 834 individuals were convicted for human smuggling, nearly half of whom received prison sentences, with the combined share of prison and house arrest sentences reaching 80%. In the same period, 72 individuals were convicted of smuggling people as members of an organized criminal group, 71 of whom were



sentenced to prison, with 95% of them receiving sentences of 2 years or longer. A significant number of foreign nationals are also convicted of human smuggling, most of whom are from the countries where irregular migrants originate (Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc.). The incident that occurred at the end of October 2023, when a confrontation between smuggling groups resulted in the deaths of three Afghan nationals, further confirms that foreign nationals are taking over human smuggling operations through Serbia from domestic criminal groups.

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