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Control of Irregular Migration and Suppression of People Smuggling on the Western Balkan Route

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Abstract: *The subject of this paper is irregular migration and modern models of preventing the smuggling of migrants on the part of the Western Balkan route through the Republic of Serbia. The goal is to show how the new strategic approach of the Serbian police in this area can give excellent results, that the application of modern methods of policing and technical means are aimed at preventing the smuggling of migrants, i.e., the illegal movement and transport of migrants across the state border and state territory to go to countries of the European Union. Based on the conducted research, the authors have drawn certain conclusions: 1) effectiveness, efficiency, and economy in the area of suppression of irregular migration can be achieved by applying an adequate criminal strategy, 2) the new strategic approach led to the discovery and arrest of a large number of people smugglers and the discovery of illegal firearms, 3) the use of modern technical means, coordinated, joint work of different police units and management from a single center by a strategic level manager directly in charge of combating irregular migration and human smuggling in a particular area (territory) which is estimated to be a hotspot of criminal activity, is a prerequisite for success.*

Keywords: *Security; Irregular Migration; Western Balkans; European Union; Police; Smuggling*

INTRODUCTION

This research is prompted by events that occurred in the northern region of the Republic of Serbia during the last quarter of 2023. The Serbian police detected an increased number of irregular migrants, some of whom were engaged in violent criminal activities. Although similar events have been observed before, of lower intensity, the turning point for the reactions of the Serbian police occurred in the town of Horgoš, near the Serbian-Hungarian border, at the end of October 2023, when there was an armed conflict between two groups of irregular migrants, during which three of them were killed, one was wounded. Four Afghan citizens and two Turkish citizens were arrested. After searching the terrain and the surrounding forests, the police found two automatic rifles with dozens of pieces of ammunition and another 79 irregular migrants who were relocated to reception centers (MUP 2023a). In the next 24 hours, they detected and relocated another 870 irregular migrants throughout Serbia (MUP 2023b).

Irregular migration in the 21st century began on a large scale after the "Arab Spring" (Goldner Lang and Nagy 2021), the name used for the wave of demonstrations, protests, and uprisings in predominantly Arab countries initiated on 17 December 2010, with the self-immolation of Muhammad Buzizia in protest against police corruption in Tunisia (Milojević and Janković 2012a). Then the protests spread to Egypt (at the beginning of 2011), Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, as well as to the borders of Israel, while

smaller protests occurred in Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Western Sahara (Milojević and Janković 2012a). The "Arab Spring" led to the political and security destabilization of several countries in the region.

Citizens of the mentioned countries wanted a better life in more prosperous nations of Western Europe. The road to them led through several directions (routes). Chart 1 (FRONTEX 2023c) shows the following routes: Western African route, Western Mediterranean route, Central Mediterranean route, Western Balkan route, Eastern Mediterranean Land route, Eastern Mediterranean Sea route, and Channel route (by sea across the English Channel). On the same chart, it can be seen that the number of detected irregular migrants in 2022 was the highest on the Western Balkan route, so we shall keep our attention on this route.

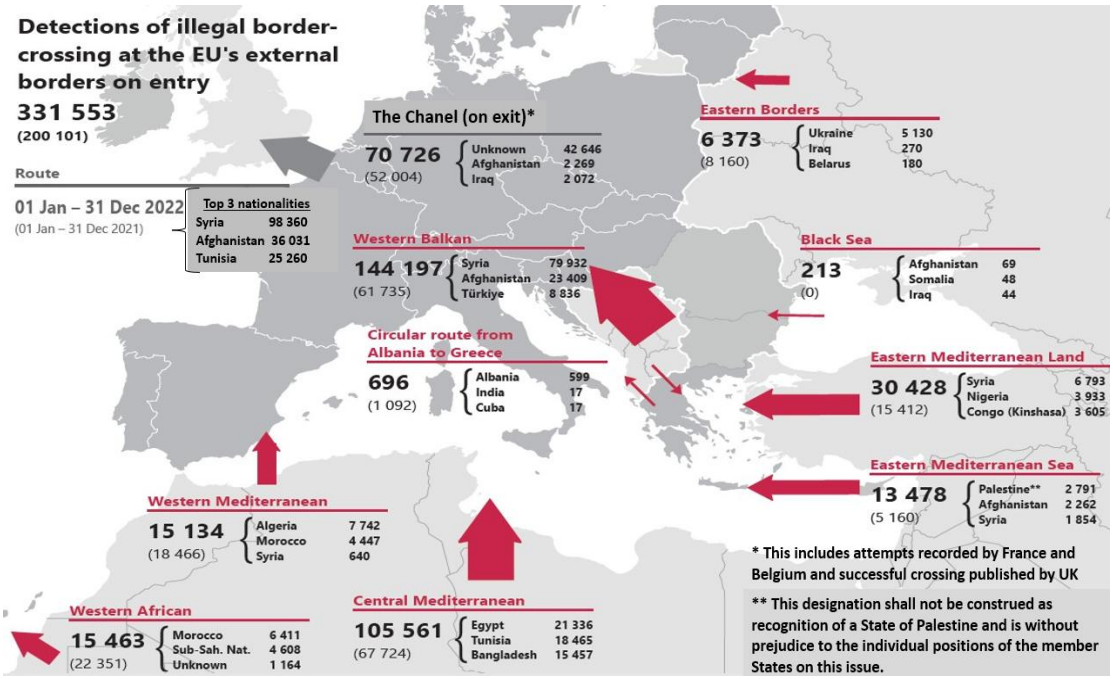


Chart 1: Detections of Illegal Border Crossings at the EU's External Borders on Entry (Source: FRONTEX 2023c)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Irregular migration is a widespread topic in scientific literature. It can be defined as any movement of the population from one country to another that is not in accordance with the valid legal regulations of the country of origin and the country of destination (Dostić and Tančić 2022). Forced massive irregular migrations most often occur when people flee, fearing for their lives or the lives of family members due to armed conflicts, war, persecution on religious, racial, national, or other grounds, but also due to poverty, climate change, infectious diseases, major natural and/or other disasters. The problem of irregular migrants is examined from different angles in different regions. Since the research subject is the migration problem on the Western Balkan route, the focus will be on the research conducted in the countries on the mentioned route.

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Many studies deal with the routes through which irregular migrants are transferred to Europe and the ways of transferring them across the border (Böröcz 2021; Jose and Kojic 2015; Milašinović, Janković, and Milojević 2024), emphasizing that this is not a spontaneous phenomenon but is carried out by organized criminal groups of smugglers (Stoynova and Bezlov 2019). Particular studies emphasize that irregular migrants are a big security problem in certain countries, e.g., Bulgaria (Stoynova and Bezlov 2019), Serbia (Janković and Todorović 2017; Milašinović et al. 2024), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Galić 2022; Kržalić and Kobajica 2021). It is especially emphasized that there is a danger of terrorists infiltrating irregular migrants and that this problem represents a security challenge for the security services (Janković and Todorović 2017).

Another group of studies examines the problems irregular migrants encounter on their way to the promised states of the European Union. These problems range from direct violence by the police, as is the case in Croatia, to a subtler form of violence while exercising certain rights, often based on racial grounds (Isakjee, Davies, Obradović-Wochnik, and Augustová 2020), obtaining asylum (Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore 2016; Nancheva 2016), and the abuse of irregular migration to ensure the necessary labor force (Cheliotis 2017). Migrants are often portrayed very negatively in the media, as observed in the research conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kržalić and Kobajica 2021). Analyzing media announcements in Bosnia and Herzegovina over 3 years, the authors noticed that a specific part of the public has a negative perception of refugees and migrants who come from the Middle East, whereby specific subgroups are often the subject of pronounced social stereotypes and prejudices. Such a negative perception is not the result of personal experience but was created on the topics and narratives promoted by the media. All of the above can contribute to the strengthening of stigmatization and discrimination of the refugee and migrant population among the public, as well as the possibility of generating growing distrust towards the relevant state institutions dealing with issues of control and management of migration flows (Kržalić and Kobajica 2021).

The third group of studies examines ways to combat cross-border crime and irregular migration. Transnational threats, cross-border crime, and irregular migration require comprehensive, multidimensional, and well-coordinated responses. Some authors (Milenko and Zorančo 2020; Wagner 2023) propose integrated border management as a concept that meets all the mentioned criteria. The concept is also applied in countries on the Western Balkan route, including the Republic of Serbia (Milenko and Zorančo 2020). It is based on the cooperation of all border agencies, within the agencies, between agencies, and at the international level (Marković 2023; Milojević and Janković 2022). In addition to integrated border management, which requires developed international cooperation, some authors have considered bilateral international police cooperation of individual states in securing state borders.

One of the studies (Gwardynski and Zboina 2021) analyzed changes in the efficiency of cross-border operations of the Polish and Czech police forces in the Opole region and the Czech border zone in the period 2015-2018. Research conclusions indicate that cross-border police cooperation is necessary, even at the level of joint patrol operations, which, when properly planned, can contribute to maintaining security in border zones on both sides of the state border (Gwardynski and Zboina 2021). However, it must be considered that all these agencies involved in securing the state border must pay attention to the possibility of corruption in their services and find ways to effectively oppose this negative phenomenon (Jancsics 2019; Janković

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and Milojević 2017; Marković and Dostić 2020). Moreover, all border agencies, especially the border police, must be prepared for different ways of illegal border crossing. The use of counterfeit travel documents is the most sophisticated method of illegal border crossing, as it requires the application of advanced technology and significant financial investments (Bogojević and Dostić 2018; Marković 2021).

In accordance with the above, police officers who secure the state border need special equipment and specific specialist training to successfully respond to complex challenges in their daily work (Janković and Milojević 2014; Marković 2021). Such challenges, together with migrations, can be specific tasks, such as border control of radioactive material, that require special knowledge and skills (Petrova and Dojcinovski 2022). New technology has also been used in migration control based on risk assessment in recent years. For example, authors in the Netherlands (Dekkers, van der Woude, and Koulish 2019; Dekkers 2019) analyze Amigo-boras, a system of smart cameras placed on roads near borders, which serves to assess the risk of irregular migration. Before the installation of this system, vehicle stops were solely based on the assessment of a police officer. Since the cameras have been installed, the system analyses the given parameters to assess which vehicle should be stopped, and the information is forwarded to the police officer, who stops the vehicle and further determines whether there are irregular migrants in the vehicle.

THE WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE

The International Organization for Migration characterized Europe as "the most dangerous destination in the world for irregular migrants" and the Mediterranean as "the most dangerous border crossing" (Janković and Todorović 2017, 175). Because of the above, migrants avoid the sea route and opt for a safer one, avoiding the sea route that leads across the Mediterranean Sea. That is why migrants opt for the Western Balkan route, the largest number of them via the route that leads from Turkey through Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia (Böröcz 2021; Janković and Todorović 2017), and the other one from Turkey through Bulgaria to Serbia (Stoynova and Bezlov 2019). Previously, migrants from Serbia most often tried to enter the European Union through Hungary, and when that country firmly closed its border with high fences, migrants first redirected their movement directly toward Croatia (Runcheva Tasev et al. 2023) and later to the same country, but through Bosnia and Herzegovina (Filipović and Čvorović 2022; Galić 2022). Migrants come to Bosnia and Herzegovina from Serbia, but also partly from the other direction: Greece - Albania - Montenegro (Kržalić and Kobajica 2021).

Various studies show different data on the number of irregular migrants passing through their territories. Although the records cannot cover the complete fluctuation of all irregular migrants, they can still help us establish movement trends, movement routes, countries from which migrants come, and the like. The most realistic numbers seem to be those owned by FRONTEX because they are not burdened by everyday political relations in a particular country. Chart 2 shows data on irregular migrants detected at the borders of the European Union who came via the Western Balkan route. It can be observed that the largest number of migrants crossed this route in 2015 and that the number of irregular migrants has been constantly increasing in recent years.

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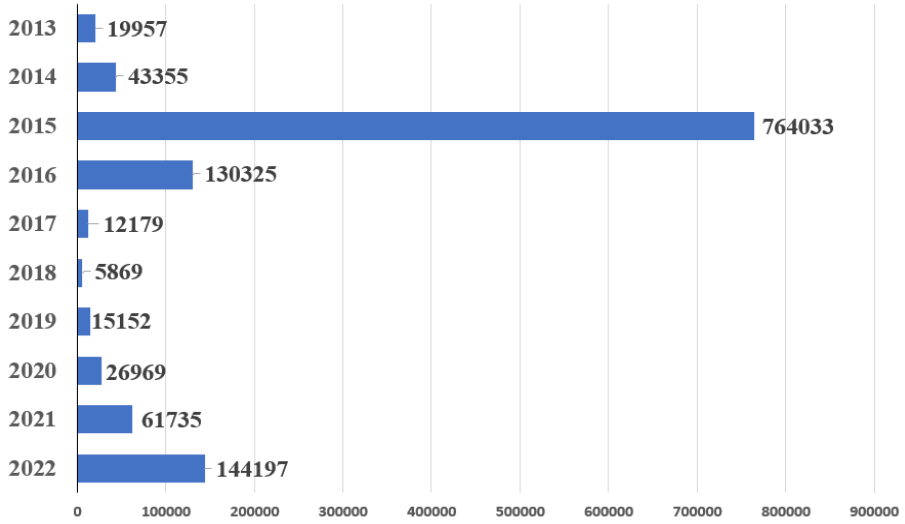


Chart 2: The Number of Irregular Migrants Detected at EU Borders on the Western Balkans Route (Source: FRONTEX 2023a)

As for the countries of origin of irregular migrants, statistical data show that the largest number of them are from Syria and Afghanistan, countries that used to be or are still at war (Table 1).

Table 1: Illegal Border Crossings on the Western Balkans Route in Numbers (Source: FRONTEX 2023b)

	2014	2015	2016-2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Syria	7320	90064	8305	16644	38723	79932	240988
Afghanistan	8342	53237	21015	5252	12297	23409	123552
Pakistan	368	17057	11494	291	802	6370	36382
Iraq	421	7424	5365	749	698	1896	16553
Turkey	269	407	2074	155	1652	8836	13393
Tunisia	32	40	182	190	842	6782	8068
India	9	478	302	68	557	6992	8406
Morocco	20	178	1016	635	1249	3117	6215
Bangladesh	274	4356	735	237	453	313	6368
Algeria	40	377	969	232	313	248	2179
Somalia	182	669	417	58	927	429	2682
Albania	501	567	1034	102	123	143	2470
Libya	10	63	345	616	768	299	2101

Of all illegal crossings at the land borders of the European Union, as many as 74% (144,197) of them were detected at the border with Serbia (FRONTEX 2023c). Compared to 2021, this is an increase of about 136%, representing the largest number of irregular crossings of the state border since 2015, when the migrant crisis began. The largest number of irregular migrants who cross the territory of Serbia have chosen Germany as their desired destination country (Milašinović et al. 2024).

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CHANGE IN POLICE PROCEDURE IN COMBATING PEOPLE SMUGGLING AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION

In the Republic of Serbia, there is an accepted model in which border security is entrusted to police authorities, in contrast to the earlier military system of state border security (Milojević and Janković 2012b). From 2005 to 2007, the police completely took over border control from the military, after which the civilian security protection of the state border was implemented. Border control is entrusted to the Border Police Directorate (BPD), one of the directorates within the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia (MoI). Since 2006, the BPD has been functioning as a single and centralized organizational unit of the Police Directorate at the headquarters, hierarchically organized at the central, regional, and local levels (Marković 2023). At the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015, the other organizational units of the MoI of the Republic of Serbia (Gendarmerie, Police Intervention Units, etc.) sent help in the form of their members. When Hungary closed its borders by building barbed wire fences, it became clear that police forces alone could not adequately stop large numbers of irregular migrants (Janković and Todorović 2017). Therefore, in 2016, Serbia had to engage members of the Serbian Army to assist police units in monitoring the state border with Bulgaria and North Macedonia (Janković and Todorović 2017). After the immigration crisis subsided in 2015 and 2016, border control was returned to the exclusive responsibility of the police.

Proactive actions, the use of modern models and tools for assessing risks and threats from serious and organized crime, intelligence collection of data from the criminal environment, data analysis, and risk assessment, and finally, the use of intelligence products by police leaders in order to make timely and effective decisions about directing human and material resources to combat certain forms of crime aim to reduce the crime rate on a global level (Marković 2019). The monitoring of criminal activities on the international level should be constantly done. New modes of committing criminal acts discovered by the police of other countries are probably already present in Serbia as well. That is why an "early warning" system was established in the BPD, which border police have already applied in all European countries. It ensures a constant exchange of information on a daily basis between the Serbian and the police of other countries in the region (Marković 2022). It was concluded that the risk analysis of border security threats is based on efficient and quick collection and exchange of all relevant data and information. The method of conducting risk analysis is defined by the standard integrated model of risk analysis (CIRAM 2.0), a methodology developed by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (hereinafter referred to as FRONTEX or Agency), the use of which is mandatory according to European legal regulations (Marković 2023a). In controlling the state border, Serbia, as a candidate for membership in the European Union, closely cooperates with FRONTEX. The cooperation was established in 2009 when the Working Arrangement on establishing operational cooperation was signed (Janković and Cvetković 2016). The cooperation has intensified in the last few years because there has been an increased influx of irregular migrants to EU countries via smuggling routes through the territory of Serbia. Therefore, in November 2019, the Status Agreement was signed between the Republic of Serbia and the European Union on actions carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter referred to as the Agreement) (Zakon o potvrđivanju Sporazuma o status izmedju Republike Srbije i Evropske unije o akcijama koje sprovodi Evropska agencija za

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graničnu i obalsku stražu u Republici Srbiji 2021). The Agreement includes all aspects of cooperation between the two parties necessary for implementing the Agency's actions that may take place on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, whereby the members of the Agency's team may have executive powers. Actions are carried out based on a joint operational plan for each individual joint operation or rapid border intervention. A joint operation with the Serbian border police was started on the Serbian-Bulgarian border in 2021 and was later extended to the Serbian-Hungarian border (Commission 2023). This cooperation aims to control irregular migratory flows, combat cross-border crime, and strengthen European cooperation.

Following the Agreement, team members can perform various tasks. Still, the overall responsibility, command, and control functions are the exclusive competence of members of the police of the Republic of Serbia, who are present throughout the implementation of the task. Team members wear their uniforms while performing tasks and exercising powers. They may carry service weapons, ammunition, and equipment if the national legislation of the Republic of Serbia authorizes them. Team members are also authorized to use coercive means, including official weapons, with the consent of the home EU member state and the Republic of Serbia, in the presence of police officers of the Republic of Serbia, and following the regulations of the Republic of Serbia. They are allowed to use weapons only if it is necessary as a form of self-defense to repel a direct attack directed at them or at another person during which their life or the life of another person is threatened, following the regulations of the Republic of Serbia. FRONTEX signed a similar agreement with other countries on the Western Balkan route of irregular migration of the Balkans - North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro.

In November 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was adopted between the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Hungary, and the Republic of Austria to strengthen trilateral cooperation in the field of effective combat against illegal migration. Based on this agreement, from 13 January 2023, between 50 and 70 police officers from Austria and Hungary with their equipment were deployed on the border of Serbia and North Macedonia to monitor the state border and combat irregular migration.

In the six years from 2018 to 2023, police officers of the MoI filed criminal charges against 1,371 suspects for committing the criminal offense of illegal border crossing and people smuggling. The largest number of perpetrators, 1120, were citizens of Serbia. Of the foreign nationals, most perpetrators were citizens of Turkey, 40, followed by Afghanistan 18, Syria 18, Romania 17, and Albania 12. In addition, 57% of the suspects were deprived of their liberty; police arrests were applied to 234 persons and detention to 553 persons. Per year, the fewest perpetrators were detected in 2018, a total of 163; from 2022, it ranged to 215. The number of perpetrators of this criminal offense increased significantly in 2022 when 249 were recorded, and in 2023, as many as 417, which is 2.5 times more than in 2018 (MUP 2024). This data indicates specific changes that have occurred in the area of people smuggling in recent years. Several things have changed the police operation on a strategic and tactical level since October 2023. These were the number of detected perpetrators of the crime of human smuggling, many weapons found with smugglers during their arrests or discarded in places where smugglers and irregular migrants stayed before the implementation of police actions aimed at combating irregular migration and people smuggling, as well as the occurrence of armed confrontations between criminal groups that deal with smuggling in the area near the border with Hungary. In addition to regular activities undertaken by members of the BPD along the border line during

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border surveillance (patrols, ambushes, use of technical means) and regular activities undertaken by regional police directorates in the area (patrol and operational activities, formation of points for the control of persons and traffic funds, etc.) it was necessary to engage special units. Four remote command posts were formed in order to combat irregular migration, namely: on 29 October 2023, in Subotica to monitor the border with Hungary; on 13 November 2023, in Dimitrovgrad to prevent the entry of migrants from Bulgaria; on 4 December 2023, in Preševo for the security of the border with North Macedonia, and on 29 January 2024 in Mali Zvornik to monitor the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. The command posts were formed according to the plan of the Police Directorate, with strategic or high-level managers appointed (assistant directors in two command posts, the commander of the Gendarmerie, and the deputy chief of the BPD). Members of various police units of the Police Directorate (Gendarmerie, Special anti-terrorist units, General jurisdiction police officers, Intervention units of the police, traffic police, and others) were under their command, with the aim of coordinated, comprehensive and jointly directed action to combat the smuggling of migrants and irregular migration. We can see that remote command posts were set up successively in different parts of the country. First, the exit to Hungary was stopped, and then the entry from Bulgaria and North Macedonia was prevented. A certain number of irregular migrants who were already on the territory of Serbia tried to cross the border with Bosnia and Hercegovina using smuggling channels; therefore, that area was finally put under increased surveillance as well.

The authors had direct insight into the work of a remote command post (hereinafter referred to as headquarters) located in the city of Subotica. The headquarters controlled a territory of 6,800 hectares along the Serbian-Hungarian border of sandy soil overgrown with dense vegetation. In this area, police officers were faced with many migrants whom the smugglers were trying to bring across the Serbian-Hungarian border. Migrants paid smugglers between 4,000 and 5,000 euros for the journey from Istanbul to the Hungarian border, crossing the border and entering the European Union. Due to the high profits of smugglers, there were often armed conflicts between smuggling groups. Smugglers were connected into well-organized groups; they controlled certain territories through which they transferred migrants to Hungary. The organization of those groups can be seen in the fact that one smuggler had registered 115 different vehicles. Because of the above, the police set up permanent security checkpoints on the access roads to the border, where they controlled all vehicles, especially vans and taxis. Organized groups of Afghan citizens controlled the territory around Subotica, Syrian citizens controlled the area around Sombor, and Moroccans controlled the area around Kikinda. The transfer of migrants was organized through the "Hawala System" (Costantino and Di Nicola 2020; Faith 2011; Leman and Janssens 2018; Schloenhardt 2019). On the Western Balkan route, this practically means that the irregular migrant leaves his money for the smugglers in the office in Istanbul, which is the third independent party. Only when the migrant crosses the Hungarian border or a part of the route shall the smuggler get his money. The migrant does not give the money directly to the smuggler but to the Hawala broker, with whom he agrees a secret code or password. When the migrant crosses the Hungarian border, i.e., enters the Western Europe territory, he communicates the agreed code to another Hawala broker in that country. He reports it to the first broker, with whom the password was agreed at the location where the money was left. It is a sign that the job has been done successfully, and the smuggler/s can take the profits. Due to many migrants, millions of euros are involved in this business.

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The Serbian police had to respond effectively to all the activities of the mentioned criminal groups. The newly established headquarters in Subotica was equipped with a certain number of drones with high-resolution cameras, which were recorded clearly even from heights of 1700 meters, and the ability to work in night conditions. When the drone operator spots irregular migrants, he turns on the option to fix facial movements on the drone. During this time, a command is issued to send a certain number of police officers trained for intervention and arrest in the direction of observed migrants to apply police powers (most often: bringing, police arrest, and/or detention). The leader of the action can observe the movement of the migrants and their exact location in a live broadcast on the screen, as well as the exact location of his team members. Namely, the leaders of the police teams in the field had TETRA (TERrestrial Trunked RAdio) radio stations that transmitted the signal to the headquarters(Kujavić, Šuperina, and Magušić 2011), where the leader of the action had a clear view on the map in the form of red dots where members of the police were located, their exact spot within a meter distance always. From the headquarters, in real-time, the leader managed the movement of police officers, issued orders to block travel routes, how to surround the migrants, etc. This allowed irregular migrants to be quickly detected and arrested for violating various legal regulations. The new tactic required greater involvement of police officers, but only when migrants were spotted. By contrast, the engagement of police officers in everyday police activities, such as surveillance of the state border using patrols during all 24 hours, has been reduced. In addition to drones, police officers also used stationary cameras, the so-called hunting cameras, which they masked and placed on trees and thus obtained data in which directions the migrants were moving. After a few days, those cameras would be dislocated. When such persons were found, they were transferred to reception centers located in the south of Serbia. Other newly formed headquarters in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina acted similarly. The result of the new police tactics after less than 6 months of action, based on publicly available information, was the finding and confiscation of more than 100 pieces of different types of firearms that were in illegal possession of smugglers, most of which automatic and with a huge amount of ammunition. After two months of operations at the headquarters in Subotica, the Ministry of Interior announced that 6,967 irregular migrants, 38 illegal automatic rifles, 13 pistols, and 3,723 pieces of ammunition were found in that area, and more than 100 criminal charges were filed for various serious crimes related to people smuggling, illegal possession of firearms and illegal crossing of the state border (MUP 2023d). Three days after that announcement, an Afghan citizen, a member of an organized criminal group engaged in smuggling irregular migrants, was arrested in the same city. A sniper, two automatic rifles, and 568 pieces of ammunition were found in his illegal possession (MUP 2023c). Several firearms and ammunition were found discarded in the area where irregular migrants and smugglers were staying.

According to the latest information, the Western Balkan route has almost been disconnected with the application of new police tactics. Available data indicates that the number of migrants on this route in the period January-February 2024 and the same period in 2023 decreased by about 65% (FRONTEX 2024). According to the data of the Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, a total of 6 asylum centers and 10 reception centers (KIRS 2024) accommodated 647 irregular migrants on 24 April 2024, which is many times less than in the period before the establishment of remote command posts.

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From the beginning of 2024 until the specified date, 6005 irregular migrants were recorded, most of them from Syria and Afghanistan, 71%, and in the same period in 2023, there were three and a half times more, a total of 20,459 (BETA 2024). The reception centers that served to accommodate migrants are almost empty, and the decreasing trend is still evident daily. The strategic approach of the police and the application of an adequate criminal strategy in this area of police work have produced excellent results: efficiency, effectiveness, and economy have been achieved. The above indicators show that irregular migration and smuggling routes through the territory of Serbia have been reduced to a minimum with the use of minimal material and human resources and the application of modern technical means, primarily drones, and thermal imaging.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the reports of international organizations and countries in the region shows that since the beginning of 2024, there has been a large drop in the number of migrants crossing the Western Balkan route to Western and Central European countries. We can conclude that a prerequisite for success is the use of modern technical means, coordinated, joint work of different police units and management from one center by the strategic level leader directly in charge of combating irregular migration and people smuggling in a particular area (territory) that is estimated to be a hotspot of criminal activities. We believe that it is possible to undertake continuous tactical actions of this intensity, together with the application of an adequate strategy because it does not require the engagement of an additional large number of human and material resources. When making political decisions in the field of security, the principle of economy plays a significant role. The resources invested should be equivalent to the results achieved. Acquiring many modern drones equipped with high-resolution cameras for recording day and night significantly reduces the use of human and other material resources (smaller allocations for monetary compensation of police officers for work in field conditions, daily wages, vehicles, fuel for vehicles, etc.). Saving material resources necessary for the work of the Commissariat for Refugees is also significant because a certain number of reception centers can be closed. Their work is not necessary because if this trend of reducing the number of irregular migrants entering Serbia continues, there will be no need for their presence.

Indeed, the Western Balkan route has not been forgotten by migrants and smugglers. It will continue to be interesting. However, whether migrants and smugglers will use this route depends on state authorities' strategic approach to solving this problem, primarily the police. It should be considered that orders for police engagement are received from political decision-makers, so this factor must also be considered, including the attitude of state officials and the state's policy towards irregular migration. State policy cannot be observed in isolation but must be viewed within a regional and international context.

The police should certainly apply modern work models, primarily the criminal-intelligence model, to constantly analyze and assess risks related to the area of irregular migration so that strategic decision-makers could make a quality decision on the use of police units at their disposal based on the criminal-intelligence product. Apart from police tactics and technical means, which must be constantly improved, geopolitical developments should also be considered. It can undoubtedly be expected that the Western Balkan route will be used by

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people from the war-torn areas between Israel and Palestine in the coming period. Also, the countries where migrants will enter the European Union must be considered. Their main route was through Hungary. Since 2023, when Croatia entered the "Schengen zone", more and more migrants have shifted their direction of movement from Hungary to Croatia. During 2024, Romania and Bulgaria partially entered the "Schengen zone", with air and sea borders, while land borders remained outside the mentioned zone. Police units must consider all the mentioned facts and adapt their actions to the newly created situation accordingly.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Bojan Janković: writing-original draft preparation, conceptualization, methodology, software, visualization, investigation. **Saša Marković**: conceptualization, data curation, methodology, software, validation. **Aleksandar Ivanov:** writing-reviewing and editing.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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