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### **IRREGULAR MIGRANTS ON THE ROADS OF SERBIA**

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#### Abstract

With the onset of the migrant crisis in Europe, irregular migration is becoming a significant security problem for European leaders and citizens. As a result, there has also been a change in the public opinion of European countries, because many citizens associate irregular migration with terrorism and other security problems. In line with the growing importance of irregular migration as a security problem, the research aimed to determine changes in migration trends in Serbia, that is, on the 'Balkan route' of migration since 2015, when the migrant crisis in Europe began. Results that can roughly indicate the profile of an irregular migrant found on the territory of the Republic of Serbia were obtained in this research, conducted between June and August 2020 on a sample of 50 irregular migrants. An irregular migrant is a person from Afghanistan, of Islamic religion, uneducated, and of a poor financial status. They want to go to Germany for money, and they cross the borders of the countries located on the 'Balkan route' on foot, occasionally using the services of smugglers. Additionally, they have no problems with the border police of Serbia. The conducted research can contribute to gaining new knowledge about the problem of irregular migration, primarily about the trends that are different than they were at the time of the migrant crisis in 2015. Unlike previous research, this research is unique in that it also refers to the work of the border police and the attitude of border police officers toward irregular migrants.

Key words: irregular migration, migrant crisis, border police, irregular migrants, Balkan route.

# ИРЕГУЛАРНИ МИГРАНТИ НА ПУТЕВИМА СРБИЈЕ

#### Апстракт

Ирегуларне миграције постале су значајан безбедносни проблем за европске лидере и грађане са наступањем мигрантске кризе у Европи. Услед тога дошло је и до промене у јавном мњењу европских држава јер велики број грађана повезује ирегуларне миграције са тероризмом и другим безбедносним проблемима. У складу са променом значаја ирегуларних миграција као безбедносног проблема, циљ истраживања је био утврђивање промена у мигрантским трендовима у Србији, односно на "Балканској рути" миграција, од 2015. године када је ми-

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грантска криза у Европи почела. У истраживању спроведеном између јуна и августа 2020. године на узорку од 50 ирегуларних миграната дошло се до резултата који могу оквирно да укажу на профил ирегуларних миграната затечених на територији Републике Србије. То су необразована лица из Авганистана, исламске вероисповести и слабог материјалног статуса, која због новца желе да оду у Немачку, а границе држава које се налазе на Балканској рути прелазе пешке, уз повремено коришћење услуга кријумчара. Типично су то лица која немају проблема са граничном полицијом Србије. Спроведено истраживање може допринети доласку до нових сазнања о проблему ирегуларних миграција, пре свега о трендовима који су другачији но што је то био случај у време мигрантске кризе 2015. године. За разлику од претходних истраживања, ово истраживање је јединствено у делу који се односи на рад граничне полиције и на однос граничних полицајаца према ирегуларним мигрантима.

Кључне речи: ирегуларне миграције, мигрантска криза, гранична полиција, ирегуларни мигранти, Балканска рута.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Until 2015 and the the onset of the migrant crisis, with migrants pouring into Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (Ćopić & Ćopić, 2017; Djurović, 2017; Janković & Todorović, 2017), irregular migration did not pose a significant security problem for European leaders and its citizens. However, it was precisely that year that recorded a change in public opinion and the attitudes of politicians toward irregular migration. A change of attitude could also be observed in the Republic of Serbia, and it is expressed in the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, in which it is stated that one of the biggest threats on the international level is, among others, the migrant crisis, i.e., irregular migrants (Dragišić, 2021).

The term 'irregular migrant' denotes a foreigner who illegally entered the territory of a country (for example, entering a country outside a border crossing, or entering at a border crossing but with forged travel or other documents). An 'irregular migrant' is also a foreigner who entered a country legally, but remained in it after the expiration of legal residence (Ćopić & Ćopić, 2017). Illegal crossings of the state borders of European countries during the migrant crisis took place along established routes the Mediterranean route (Ilias, Leivaditi, Papatzani, & Petracou, 2019; Janković & Todorović, 2017; Terlizzi, 2019; Turanjanin & Soković, 2019), which migrants crossed by sea, and the 'Balkan route', either following the Turkey - Greece - North Macedonia - Serbia (Janković & Todorović, 2017) or the Turkey - Bulgaria - Serbia route (Stoynova, Bezlov, Dahl, & Bjelland, 2019). In 2015 alone, depending on the data source, between 579,518 (Copić & Copić, 2017) and 764,038 migrants (Janković & Todorović, 2017) crossed the 'Balkan route'. The most significant number of irregular migrants came from Syria and Iraq, and a minor number came from Afghanistan and Pakistan (Mijalković & Pe-

#### 1010

trović, 2016; Stoynova et al., 2019; Umek, Minca, & Šantić, 2019). At the same time, the percentage of European Union citizens who see terrorism and religious extremism as one of the most critical security challenges increased by 16% - from 33% in 2011 to 49% in 2015 (Djurdjević & Radović, 2015).

The most significant number of irregular migrants wanted to reach rich European countries, primarily Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Djurović, 2017; Stoynova et al., 2019; Umek et al., 2019). The main entity in preventing illegal border crossings on the way to the mentioned countries is the border police (Janković, 2014; Janković, Milojević, & Račić, 2013; Milojević & Janković, 2012). At the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015, members of the border police performed independent surveillance of the state border. However, due to the enormous increase in irregular migrants, the border police were assisted in monitoring the state border by the Gendarmerie, the army, and FRONTEKS (Janković & Cvetković, 2016; Stevčić, 2019; Stoynova et al., 2019). On their way, irregular migrants encounter numerous problems, among which are: paying high sums of money to smugglers for their transfer from one country to another (Giljević et al., 2020; Stoynova et al., 2019), bribing members of the border police (Jancsics, 2019; Janković & Milojević, 2017; Stoynova et al., 2019), and physical abuse by members of the border police (Giljević et al., 2020).

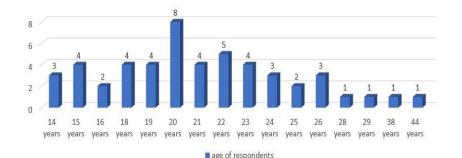
This research aimed to determine the changes in migration trends in Serbia, i.e., on the 'Balkan route' of migration, since 2015, when the migrant crisis in Europe began. These changes may be changes in movement routes, movement directions, the origin of migrants, and security risks that the mentioned migrations carry. The results obtained from the research could help the state authorities of Serbia and other countries located on the 'Balkan route' solve the problem of irregular migration in the most pleasing way.

#### **METHODS**

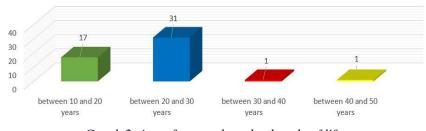
The research was conducted between June and August 2020 on a sample of 50 irregular migrants found on the territory of the Smederevo Police Department. All migrants were male because, at the time of the research, there were no female migrants in the surveyed area. The research method applied is the anonymous survey technique. Migrants were surveyed with a questionnaire written in Serbian, and translated into English and Pashto. The respondents' were offered to fill out the survey in the language they knew. In case they did not know any of the offered languages, they received help with filling in the questionnaire from translators who had not previously been in contact with the researchers. Only irregular migrants who voluntarily agreed to the survey took part in the research.

# RESULTS

By analysing the survey questionnaires, it can be noted that the age of the respondents ranged from 14 to 44 at the time the research was conducted. Graph 1 shows the age of the respondents, and it is noticeable that the most significant number of the surveyed irregular migrants were between 18 and 26 years old during this research. The average age of the respondents is 21.34 years. Of the total number of respondents, 9 were minors, and 41 were adults. If the examined irregular migrants are classified according to the decade of life, it can be noted that the second and third decades of life almost wholly dominate. Among the respondents, most persons are between the ages of 10 and 30 (Graph 2).



Graph 1. Age of respondents by years of age



Graph 2. Age of respondents by decade of life

Further analysis of the survey questionnaires found that out of 50 respondents, 41 are from Afghanistan, five are from Bangladesh, three are from Iran, and one is from Pakistan. So, out of all of the respondents, 86% are citizens of Afghanistan. The most significant number of respondents, i.e., 39, declared themselves as Muslims, while 11 declared themselves as atheists. Regarding the respondents' level of education, it was determined that 28 respondents have no education (uneducated), 13 have completed elementary school, and nine have completed secondary education. There were no respondents with a higher education.

When asked whether they were a military or police organisation member, seven out of the 50 surveyed migrants answered that they were a member of a military or police organisation. Such a broad question includes regular military service and possible membership in paramilitary units in the country of origin. A positive answer of only 14% can be justified by the fact that there were nine minors among the respondents, and the fact that the average age of the respondents is 21.3, so not all of the surveyed migrants had the opportunity to serve in the military or participate in combat operations or terrorist activities.

When it comes to the reasons why the respondents left their home country and became irregular migrants, they can be grouped into three groups: (1) lack of funds, (2) impossibility of employment, and (3) wartime environment. As many as 34 respondents cited money as a reason for leaving, ten cited war as a reason, while six stated that lack of work was their reason for leaving (Chart 3).

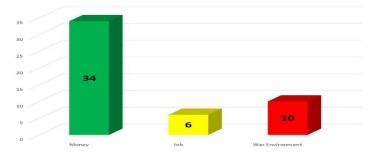


Chart 3. The respondents' reason for leaving their country of origin

In order to determine the movement routes of irregular migrants, respondents were asked to name the countries they moved through before entering the territory of Serbia. The most significant number of respondents (42 of them) entered the Republic of Serbia from North Macedonia. In contrast, eight respondents declared that they entered the Republic of Serbia from Bulgaria. Further analysis established regularity in the movement, i.e., irregular migrants from Central Asia move via Iran to Turkey, where the route splits, and the majority of the migrants go to Serbia via Greece and North Macedonia, while the rest of the migrants from Turkey reach Serbia via Bulgaria. The next question was related to the means of transportation by which they entered the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Out of a total of 50 surveyed respondents, 30 declared that they entered Serbia by truck, and two declared that they entered Serbia by train, while there were no respondents who entered by car, plane, or other means.

When asked what the desired final destination of irregular migrants is, 41 respondents declared that it was Germany, five declared that it was Great Britain, two declared that it was France, and two declared that it was Switzerland. Chart 4 indicates the desired destination of irregular migrants in Western Europe (as a geopolitical region, not only as a geographical term), with Germany leading the way as a desired destination.

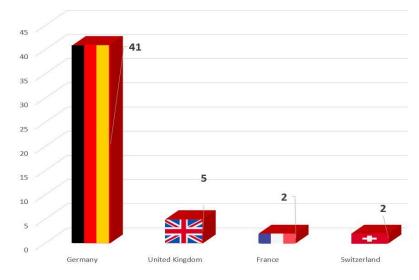


Chart 4. Desired destination countries of irregular migrants

One of the possible ways for migrants to cross the border is with the help of smugglers who charge a high price for their 'services'. Thirteen respondents stated that they paid smugglers to take them across the border, while 37 of them stated that they did not do so. Thus, as many as 26% of the respondents (every fourth respondent) gave a positive answer to this question. Out of the 13 persons who answered the question positively, five respondents declared that they used the services of people smugglers in Turkey, four used these services in Greece, and four used them in Bulgaria. In most cases, the modus operandi related to the smugglers' paid services involved the crossing of borders by truck.

In the questionnaire, a group of questions concerned the attitude of members of the border police towards migrants. The first of those questions was whether police officers and the border police applied coercive measures because some media showed that some police units used excessive force to prevent migrants from crossing the state border. Three respondents gave a positive answer, while 47 answered negatively. When asked the question of whether they bribed border police officers in the Republic of Serbia, only one of the 50 respondents gave a positive answer.

## DISCUSSION

The profile of an irregular migrant found on the territory of the Republic of Serbia can be roughly described according to the obtained results. An irregular migrant is a person from Afghanistan, of the Islamic religion, uneducated, and of a poor financial status. They want to go to Germany for money, and they cross the borders of the countries on the 'Balkan route' on foot, occasionally using the services of smugglers. Typically, they do not experience any inconvenience from the Serbian police when crossing the border.

Fifty respondents participated in the conducted research. The majority of the respondents are young people. Their average age was 21.3 years at the time of this research. When the obtained data is considered in connection with the fact that all of the the respondents are male, the motive of irregular migration can come under doubt. It is a strong indicator that the motive of migration should not be sought in the state of war in the country of origin, or in the fear of religious, national, and political persecution, because if the motive were to escape war or persecution, then the entire population of a country or a particular region within a country, or all members of a particular ethnic group would migrate. Consequently, the migrant population would also include women, children, and the elderly. In this regard, state authorities, and above all, members of the border police must take this information into account when monitoring the state border in order to prevent illegal border crossings, and while planning actions to suppress irregular migration deeper into the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that irregular migrants are at an age when they can provide adequate resistance to police officers. Because of that, it is necessary to adequately plan the treatment of migrants in the form of an increased level of caution and an adequate number of hired police officers. It should be emphasised that the analysis of gender comes to the fore only if it is observed cumulatively with the analysis of the age of irregular migrants, because it is only then that a complete picture of persons against whom adequate measures and actions should be taken is created.

Regarding the origin of the respondents, most of the surveyed irregular migrants are from Afghanistan. What is interesting is that the majority of migrants were Syrians after the escalation of the war in Syria in 2015 and the increase in the volume of migration to Europe (Mijalković & Petrović, 2016; Stoynova et al., 2019; Umek et al., 2019), while Afghans took over the primacy five years later. As for migrants from other countries (Iran, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), they come from countries that are not at war. From this, it can be concluded that these are economic migrants whose lives are not threatened by war events. Analysing the origin of irregular migrants can be helpful to border police officers when controlling flights from countries from which many irregular migrants come. Such flights are especially controlled because it is not uncommon for irregular migrants to falsify travel documents to cross the borders of different countries (Milojević & Janković, 2017). On such flights, before the regular border check that takes place at a particular counter, a pre-border check is carried out, during which passenger profiling takes place. The primary purpose of profiling-based checks is to determine the absence of usual (expected) behaviour or the presence of abnormal behaviour during the process of checking documents (for example, passports), and to analyse the behaviour of the controlled passenger.

As the dominant religion among irregular migrants is Islam, security services must pay special attention to the fact that religious fanatics can infiltrate migrants, which would be a serious threat to the security of the Republic of Serbia. Other authors state this is a possible danger (Stevčić, 2019; Vukonjanski & Sekulović, 2019). They explain that Islamic fundamentalism infiltrating the Balkans and Europe, with the ultimate intention of latent political and cultural weakening of Christian Europe, is a possible scenario threatening the security of the Republic of Serbia. The action of the Italian police on the island of Sardinia showed that migrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan are being recruited for terrorist activities on Italian soil, so this possibility must also be taken into account on the 'Balkan route' (Janković & Todorović, 2017). In particular, it must be taken into account that several irregular migrants participated in hostilities or were members of military or paramilitary formations, as indicated by the collected data. The security services of Serbia and other countries must keep this fact in mind, and mark such persons for primary monitoring by security.

As for the economic status of migrants, it is evident that persons with a poor financial status dominate, which is not surprising considering that they come from countries that are not developed countries. This data, viewed in interaction with other collected data, indicates that the real reason for migration should be sought in economic factors, and not in security factors. According to the research results, the main motives for migration are not war and fear for one's safety, but money, that is, economic reasons and the search for better material conditions. This motive can be significant when conducting the procedure for obtaining asylum before the Asylum Office. The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (2018) excludes the possibility of obtaining asylum in the Republic of Serbia for economic reasons. Asylum is granted only in cases where the person is at risk of persecution in their country of origin because of their race, gender, language, religion, nationality, specific political belief or belonging to a particular social group, due to which they cannot or do not want to accept the protection of their country of origin. The final destination of residents who migrate out of fear for their lives is the closest country in which they are safe during 'real migrations'. In contrast, during economic migrations, the final destination is a highly developed country, such as, for example, Germany.

Regarding the movement routes of irregular migrants, they have not generally changed compared to 2015, when the migrant crisis was at its peak (Janković & Todorović, 2017; Stoynova et al., 2019). In the following period, members of the border police should work on identifying micro-locations where migrants illegally cross the state border. This can be important information that can be used to prepare risk analyses during state border surveillance, i.e., determining the critical points on the borders where the most attention should be paid. However, this information could also indicate which countries should intensify cooperation to suppress irregular migration.

During the research, it was found that irregular migrants most often cross the state border on foot. This modus operandi of movement can be essential in detecting irregular crossings of the state border and suppressing the crime of 'people smuggling'. Also, if the analysis of the mode of entry is observed together with the analysis of the movement routes, it can be concluded that irregular migrants most often enter Serbia from North Macedonia, on foot through rural areas, or by truck, hiding in the cargo areas of vehicles. This fact can direct the activities of border police officers along the borderline and at border crossings more precisely.

Earlier research (Jancsics, 2019; Janković & Milojević, 2017) indicated a high level of corruption in the border police of the Republic of Serbia. In this research, it was shown that only one respondent stated that he had bribed members of the Serbian border police. Even just one case of corruption is worrying, but this is an indicator that the level of corruption is not high and that members of the border police generally perform their work conscientiously. The fact that only one migrant bribed border police officers globally is not a cause for concern. However, we should strive for the complete eradication of corrupt phenomena in the border police by identifying high-risk processes and positions in the work of the Border Police Administration, where there exists a risk that border police officers will be corrupt. Furthermore, anti-corruption measures can be implemented in places in which the increased risk has been determined. Also, earlier research indicated that members of the border police physically abused migrants (Giljević et al., 2020), which was not determined in this research. It has been shown that the members of the Serbian border police respect the Code of Police Ethics (2017). However, the education of the members of the border police regarding the treatment of irregular migrants should be continued.

## CONCLUSION

The results of empirical research conducted in 2020 indicate that economic migrations occur through the territory of the Republic of Serbia, and that most irregular migrants in our country cannot obtain asylum due to the correct legal solutions that regulate that area. Also, determining the profile of the average irregular migrant and the average irregular migration, while also taking into account that there is a possibility that terrorists use the flows of irregular migration to achieve their goals, can significantly indicate the core of the problem, which can direct the work of the state authorities of the Republic of Serbia.

The research of irregular migration routes has almost established a regularity in the movement of irregular migrants arriving in Turkey from their country of origin via Iran. The route to Serbia is divided into two directions, the first of which goes through Greece and North Macedonia, while the second goes through Bulgaria. The research determined that the dominant direction of migration is from North Macedonia; that is, this border is the most threatened from the point of view of irregular migration. This fact can be of great importance for police officers of the border police at the operational, tactical, and strategic levels. The degree of threat to the borders and the issue of the critical points on them should be taken into account when drawing up plans to combat irregular migration, and while determining and deploying police officers and material resources. In correlation with that, one can also consider the information established by the research, which notes that irregular migrants during 2020 predominantly entered the territory of the Republic of Serbia on foot via the 'green belt' and avoided police officers and border control on those occasions.

Given that the end of the migratory process is not in sight, it is necessary for all countries on the migratory route to achieve absolute cooperation in taking the necessary steps to solve this very complex problem. Transit countries must maintain adequate mutual communication, they must harmonise legal regulations and, to the greatest extent possible, they must standardise the treatment of irregular migrants. It would be desirable for each country to have a liaison officer in neighbouring countries from which an influx of irregular migrants is expected. In the case of Serbia, these countries are North Macedonia and Bulgaria. The liaison officer would monitor the state of irregular migration in the country where he is located and quickly and efficiently forward the collected data to plan measures and actions to adequately combat irregular migration. In addition, Serbia must sign readmission agreements with the irregular migrants' countries of origin. These agreements would open up the possibility of returning irregular migrants to their countries of origin if they are not in interstate or civil war, and if irregular migrants are not in danger of any persecution. This possibility would effectively solve the problem of the so-called 'economic migrants' who, abusing the right to asylum, move irregularly from their countries of origin to the countries of Western Europe. Applying the readmission system would demotivate irregular migrants and significantly reduce their number.

The conducted research gathered new knowledge about the problem of irregular migration, primarily about trends that are currently different than they were during the migrant crisis in 2015. Unlike previous research, this research is unique in that it refers to the work of the border police and their attitude towards irregular migrants. Indeed, this initial research in this area only provides a framework for further research. In future research, the number of respondents should be increased, because the authors encountered the problem of selecting respondents since a significant number of migrants were not willing to cooperate. Also, the number of survey questions in future research should be increased and directed more precisely towards the parts of the research subject that are the focus of the researcher, in order to obtain even more precise information.

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# ИРЕГУЛАРНИ МИГРАНТИ НА ПУТЕВИМА СРБИЈЕ

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#### Резиме

Циљ истраживања је био утврђивање промена у мигрантским трендовима у Србији које су се догодиле након 2015. године када је мигрантска криза у Европи почела. Другим речима, циљ истраживања било је испитивање потенцијалних промена у рутама кретања, правцима кретања, пореклу миграната и безбедносним ризицима које носе поменуте миграције.

Истраживање је спроведено између јуна и августа 2020. године на узорку од 50 ирегуларних миграната затечених на територији Полицијске управе Смедерево. Сви мигранти у узорку су мушког пола. Примењена је метода испитивања техником анонимног анкетирања. Мигранти су анкетирани анкетним упитником који је сачињен на српском, а затим је преведен на енглески и паштунски језик. У анкетирању су учествовали само ирегуларни мигранти који су добровољно пристали на анкетирање.

Анализом анкетних упитника може се уочити да се узраст испитаника креће у распону од 14 до 44 године. Просечна старост испитаника износи 21.34 године. Међу испитаницима је највише лица од 10 до 30 година старости. Утврђено је да је њих 41 пореклом из Авганистана, пет из Бангладеша, три из Ирана и један из Пакистана. Њих 39 изјаснило се да су исламске вероисповести, док се 11 испитаника изјаснило да су атеисти. Такође, утврђено је да 28 испитаника нема никакав вид образовања (необразовано), 13 испитаника има завршену основну школу, а 9 испитаника има завршено средње образовање.

Према добијеним резултатима може се оквирно описати профил ирегуларних миграната затечених на територији Републике Србије. То су необразована лица из Авганистана, исламске вероисповести и слабог материјалног статуса, која због новца желе да оду у Немачку, а границе држава које се налазе на Балканској рути прелазе пешке, уз повремено коришћење услуга кријумчара. Типично су то лица која немају проблема са граничном полицијом Србије.

Мотив миграције не треба тражити у ратном стању у држави порекла или у страху од верског, националног и политичког прогона, већ у економским разлозима. Ирегуларни мигранти се налазе у животној доби када могу пружити адекватан отпор полицијским службеницима, те је неопходно на адекватан начин планирати поступање према њима у виду повећаног степена опрезности и адекватног броја полицијских службеника које треба ангажовати. Међу мигранте могу да се инфилтрирају верски фанатици што би било веома опасно угрожавање безбедности Републике Србије. Руте кретања ирегуларних миграната се нису генерално промениле у односу на 2015. годину када је мигрантска криза била на врхунцу. Ирегуларни мигранти најчешће државну границу прелазе пешке. Само је један испитаник изјавио да је дао мито припадницима граничне полиције Србије. Такође, ни један испитаник није био физички злостављан од стране припадника служби безбедности Србије.

Преко територије Републике Србије одвијају се економске миграције и већина ирегуларних миграната у нашој држави не може добити азил. С обзиром на то да се крај миграторног процеса не види у скоријој будућности, неопходно је да све државе које се налазе на миграторној рути постигну апсолутно садејство у предузимању неопходних корака ка решавању тог веома сложеног проблема. Неопходно је да Србија потпише уговоре о реадмисији са државама порекла ирегуларних миграната, што би демотивисало ирегуларне мигранте и значајно умањило њихов број. За разлику од претходних истраживања ово истраживање је јединствено у делу који се односи на рад граничне полиције и њихов односа према ирегуларним мигрантима.

1022