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**GLOBAL
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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

BORDERLINE

IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR
ON MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN
SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The war in Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, has spurred the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. According to EU border and coastguard agency Frontex, by the end of 2022, 15 million Ukrainian citizens had fled to Europe since the beginning of the war, with roughly 3 million choosing to stay.¹ While the unforeseen scale of the refugee crisis meant that much of the border authorities' efforts and resources were occupied, people smuggling networks took advantage of the situation, and the number of irregular migrants from the Middle East travelling along the Western Balkan route soared. There are many contributing factors to this trend, but migrant smuggling has indeed resurfaced as the fastest-growing market for organized crime in the Balkan region. At the start of September 2022, Frontex reported that they had documented the highest number of irregular entries since 2016, with a 75% increase compared to the same period in the previous year. Thus, in 2022, the Western Balkan route became the most active European migration route, surpassing the Central and Western Mediterranean routes (see Figure 4).²

This paper assesses the factors that contributed to the emergence of the Western Balkan route as the most critical for irregular migration to the EU during 2022, focusing in particular on the impact of the war in Ukraine on refugee flows from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and its implications for the future. It analyzes how, if anything, refugee flows from Ukraine have affected pre-existing movements of migrants from MENA countries on the Western Balkan route indirectly, exacerbating dynamics and network operations. It also estimates the overall number of irregular migrants smuggled along the Western Balkan route since 2016, describes the evolution of smuggling networks in 2022 and assesses the implications for South Eastern Europe.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the state of human smuggling along the Western Balkan route in 2022, the first year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, based on information gathered through mixed methods research consisting of qualitative and quantitative desk research. The desk research involved reviewing media reports and grey and academic literature on migration and human smuggling. It also involved collecting statistical data on irregular border crossings, apprehended irregular migrants and registered asylum seekers from Frontex, the UN High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) and the national authorities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The publicly available data was used to estimate the dark figure of overall irregular migrant flows along the Balkan route. The analysis was complemented by in-depth interviews with experts from various institutions and organizations in the region. A total of 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts from national police and border guard agencies, civil society organizations working with asylum seekers, and investigative journalists. A guiding questionnaire with key questions and topics was shared with the field researchers to ensure consistency in the information-gathering process.



Tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees wait at the Polish border trying to cross from Ukraine in March 2022. By the end of 2022, roughly 15 million Ukrainian citizens had fled to Europe since the beginning of the Ukraine war. © Paula Bronstein via Getty Images



BACKGROUND: A RELIABLE ROUTE

Over the past decade, South Eastern Europe has become a crossroads for irregular migrants from the MENA region heading to countries in Western Europe. The migrant flow on this route started in the 1990s and peaked in 2014/15,³ continuing today, with the latest developments indicating that the number of irregular migrants detected at EU borders is increasing. According to preliminary data from Frontex, 330 000 irregular migrants entered the EU in 2022, the highest number of reported irregular entries since 2016.⁴ Of these, 145 000 migrants (45%) used the Western Balkan route.

The surge of irregular migrants from the MENA region into the EU in 2022 followed three commonly used routes: the Western Mediterranean, the Central Mediterranean and the Eastern Mediterranean (and its extension, the Western Balkan route). In the Western Balkans, the number of irregular migrants increased by 136% against the figure for 2021, while those using the Central Mediterranean route grew by 51%. Meanwhile, the number of migrants moving along the Western Mediterranean route decreased by 21%.⁵

The surge in irregular migration through the Balkans in 2022 led to tensions among first-line countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, and destination countries including Austria and the Netherlands. On 8 December 2022, Austria vetoed the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen area, citing the vast increase in irregular migrants transiting the two countries as the reason for the refusal. The opposition parties in the Austrian Parliament subsequently contested the evidence and motives presented by the government and filed a written question to the Interior Ministry.⁶ The Netherlands also voted against Bulgaria's accession, citing the high number of migrants illegally crossing the Bulgarian borders. Austria has additionally strongly criticized Serbia's visa policy, which has allowed many irregular migrants from India, Tunisia, Cuba and Burundi to enter the EU through Serbia.

In 2015, the Western Balkan route emerged as one of the main paths of irregular migration from the MENA region into the EU, although irregular migration has been active along it since the 1990s.⁷ The push and pull factors of irregular migration along the route pre-date the current war in Ukraine. These underlying aspects are best understood by looking at the recent developments regarding the Western Balkan route.

The 2015 refugee and migrant crisis was the most critical since the formation of the EU. Almost 1 million refugees and irregular migrants arrived in the EU in 2015, escaping instability in countries in the Middle East – particularly Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸ By 2015, Turkey had become a significant reception country for Syrian refugees, with 2.5 million officially registered, and was doing little to prevent the onward movement of refugees to EU countries.⁹ In March and April 2015, the Greek islands closest to the Turkish coast became the main stepping stones for migrants entering Greece from Turkey. In just three months, between March and May 2015, the number of migrants crossing into Greece reached the same level as for the whole of 2014. Greece's leftist government began transporting migrants from the islands to the mainland and from there to the border with North Macedonia. The governments in the Western Balkans along the route followed with similar arrangements.¹⁰ The result was that the average cost of a migrant's journey to Western Europe plummeted, since migrants could reach their destination countries speedily without paying smugglers. The lower costs attracted vast numbers of asylum seekers from countries experiencing military conflicts, such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but also irregular migrants from Middle Eastern countries, most notably Pakistan and Iran, and from many African countries (including Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Nigeria).¹¹

The 2015 refugee crisis aided in forging the two main branches of the Western Balkan route, which are still in place today.¹² The primary branch to Western and northern Europe extends from Turkey to Greece and continues through Albania and Northern Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Austria. The second branch spans from Turkey to Bulgaria. It continues through Serbia and Hungary or, though to a much lesser extent, through Romania and Hungary (see Figure 4). The massive flow of migrants in June and July 2015 triggered attempts to limit unauthorized entries in countries such as North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Hungary by sending additional police and army units to stem the flow of migrants and by investing in border fences.

By the end of 2017, Bulgaria had completed a border fence and instituted a surveillance and control system along the border with Turkey and established specialized police units to combat criminal groups involved in human smuggling. Arrangements with Turkey and new Bulgarian measures sharply reduced the number of migrants entering Bulgaria irregularly in 2017 and 2018. In 2018, Bulgarian authorities officially registered only 1 949 irregular migrants. At the same time, Turkey's relationship with Greece deteriorated, and the flow of irregular migrants to Greece rapidly increased. The displacement of the flow indicated the interdependence of the routes traversing Bulgaria and Greece: obstructing the flow of irregular migrants in one leads to an increase in irregular migration through the other. Thus, in 2020 and 2021, the number of unauthorized entries in Greece declined, while in Bulgaria, they increased (see Figure 1).

Year	Greece	Bulgaria
2016	177 234	28 177
2017	36 310	4 957
2018	50 508	1 949
2019	74 613	2 495
2020	15 696	4 238
2021	9 157	12 280
2022	18 780	18 729

FIGURE 1 Irregular migrants apprehended in Bulgaria and Greece, 2016–2022.

SOURCE: Bulgarian and Greek interior ministries

Similar interdependence is observed between the routes transiting Western Balkan countries. After the efforts of North Macedonia and Serbia to restrict the flow of migrants from Greece to central Europe, migration routes shifted towards Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³ The COVID-19 pandemic did not slow this process in 2020/21; in fact, 2020 saw an increase in the number of asylum seekers and migrants entering the Western Balkans.¹⁴ In 2021, the relaxation of measures implemented against the pandemic in Bulgaria made it again a preferred route for irregular migrants. Another factor influencing migration flows during this period was the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on 30 August. The new Taliban regime brought with it persecution of political opponents and various societal groups, political and economic instability, and triggered an increased flow of Afghan citizens escaping the insecurity and conflict, thus adding to existing migration flows.¹⁵ The abolishment of pandemic measures in Europe and the start of the war in Ukraine marked a return to high levels of irregular migration similar to those seen in 2016.



THE UKRAINE WAR AND THE WESTERN BALKAN ROUTE

Although the war in Ukraine has little to do with the factors that have generally driven irregular migration from the MENA region along the Western Balkan route, it has nevertheless had a significant impact on the dynamics in 2022. The effects were, to an extent, indirect and primarily related to the strain placed on the institutional resources of some countries along the route, such as Bulgaria and Romania, which experienced a large influx of Ukrainian refugees in the first half of the year.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered an unprecedented wave of Ukrainian citizens seeking asylum in Europe, with the number of refugees far exceeding even the number of Syrian asylum seekers in the 2015 crisis. According to preliminary data from the UNHCR, by the end of 2022, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe had reached 15 million.¹⁶ Unlike the migrants from the MENA region that predominantly rely on people smuggling networks arranging illegal border crossings, Ukrainian refugees in the Balkan countries during 2022 generally followed legal routes and means of entry.

Legal status of Ukrainian migrants

Before the start of the war, Ukrainian citizens benefited from visa-free entry into the EU and the Western Balkan countries and could stay for up to 90 days, except in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the permitted length of stay was up to 30 days. Immediately after the war began, the Council of the European Union unanimously adopted an implementing decision introducing temporary asylum protection for all Ukrainian citizens fleeing the conflict, automatically granting them refugee status and allowing them to reside for an initial period of one year, according to the decision that the period may be extended automatically by six-monthly periods for a maximum of one year.¹⁷ In solidarity, all Western Balkan governments quickly adopted similar measures. According to the UNHCR, 4.9 million people received temporary protection from countries in Europe in 2022.¹⁸ Unlike asylum seekers and irregular migrants from other countries, Ukrainian citizens did not need assistance from people smugglers since they were allowed to legally enter, reside and move freely within the EU before and after the start of the war. ■

In addition to the movement of Ukrainian nationals, the outbreak of the war in 2022 triggered a significant flight of Russian citizens. Like Ukrainians, before the war, Russian citizens also had the legal right to visa-free entry and could stay up to 30 (sometimes 90) days in most Western Balkan countries (except Kosovo). Russian citizens with valid Schengen visas could also enter Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Greece. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Albania and North Macedonia suspended visa-free entry for Russian citizens, but Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia preserved it. By various estimates, the number of people who emigrated from Russia in 2022 was between 600 000 and 1 million.¹⁹ Most headed to neighbouring visa-free countries such as Turkey, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Armenia. However, some travelled on tourist visas to the EU and the Western Balkans, where most countries still had a visa-free regime with Russia in 2022.²⁰ After the EU countries harshly restricted the entry of Russian citizens, Serbia became one of the preferred countries of destination for Russian nationals. Estimates from the Serbian Internal Affairs Ministry indicate that, in 2022, almost 220 000 Russians entered Serbia, although not all remained there.²¹ There was a similar surge in emigration of Russian citizens to Montenegro in 2022, but on a much smaller scale – almost 13 000 Russian expats settled there after the start of the war.²²

The massive inflow of Ukrainian refugees experienced in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania has had two distinct effects on the people smuggling networks operating in the Balkan region. First, it has caused the redistribution of law enforcement resources in accepting countries, with additional border police and migration officers required to manage the flow, thus opening up more opportunities for people smugglers to extend their operations. Second, it has provided these networks with unique opportunities to actively recruit Ukrainian citizens in vulnerable situations, typically at the lowest levels of the smuggling operations.

Bulgaria and Romania

Of all the countries in South Eastern Europe, those bordering Ukraine, namely Romania and Hungary, have been the most affected by the refugee crisis and have accepted the largest number of Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war. The UNHCR reports that 1.8 million Ukrainian nationals entered Romania from Ukraine in 2022. In particular, Romania has granted temporary protection to 104 000 people and has registered 106 000 people as refugees. In Hungary, 2 million people have entered from Ukraine, and the country has recorded 33 000 refugees.²³ Inevitably, this massive inflow of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war strained the administration of both countries during the first year of the Russian invasion. Romania and Hungary have had to transfer significant numbers of border police, migration and customs officers from the borders with Serbia across the Ukrainian border to manage the refugee flow from Ukraine.

Similarly, the number of illegal border crossings at the Bulgarian–Turkish border increased in 2022 as the Bulgarian authorities allocated additional police and border guard personnel to the Romanian border to deal with the refugee flow from Ukraine. Other factors also contributed to this increased migratory pressure at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey, including the widespread lifting of COVID-related restrictions and the decision of the Turkish government to reduce the number of their police and gendarmerie forces at the border.²⁴

Bulgaria is an unusual case since it does not border Ukraine but has nevertheless attracted many of the country's refugees. By the end of 2022, 954 298 Ukrainians had entered Bulgaria,



A group of migrants traverse a field near the Serbian village of Majdan, close to the Hungarian and Romanian borders. Serbia has become a key transit point for irregular migrants from the MENA region heading to Western Europe. © Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images

many in transit to Western European countries.²⁵ Yet, according to the UNHCR, approximately 148 000 Ukrainian citizens enlisted for temporary protection in Bulgaria in 2022, with refugee status granted to 51 000 of them.²⁶ Interviews with police officers from the Border Police General Directorate and the Migration Directorate at the Interior Ministry showed that the two agencies did not need to allocate significant additional resources to migration management in the first few months of the crisis.²⁷ Although Bulgaria deployed additional border police staff at the Romanian border between March and May 2022, the Ukrainian refugee flow dropped in the following months. However, the growing traffic of goods destined for Ukraine did demand additional border police personnel to handle the increasing number of vehicles at the border crossing points. Similarly, Bulgaria's Black Sea ports significantly increased their operations to compensate for the closure of the Ukrainian ports, which also put pressure on Bulgarian border police resources. All of this affected the control of irregular migration at the Bulgarian–Turkish border.

Interviewed experts identified two problematic developments related to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Bulgaria.²⁸ The first was the decision at the political level that border police should do everything possible to prevent unauthorized entries of irregular migrants at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey. At that time, the Bulgarian Interior Ministry was concerned that more irregular migrants in the asylum centres would lead to increased costs for the national budget, which already had large expenditures to support Ukrainian refugees. The immediate consequence was that the Bulgarian police focused on 'pushing back' migrants rather than investigating and dealing with smuggling groups. This approach led to a situation in which the prosecuting authorities were rarely able to indict smugglers since there were few irregular migrants available to testify against them.

The second issue relates to the increasing involvement of Ukrainian nationals in people smuggling networks in Bulgaria. Some Ukrainian criminal networks had been operating in the Balkans since before 2022 (mainly in Greece), but they expanded their activities after the start of the war. In the case of Bulgaria, these criminal networks started to recruit and employ Ukrainians with no criminal backgrounds as drivers. There are also allegations that Ukrainian criminal networks have been involved in smuggling men of conscription age prevented from leaving Ukraine under the restrictions on movement.²⁹

Western Balkan countries

With the exception of flows to Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, the number of Ukrainian refugees entering the Balkans was relatively small in 2022 (see Figure 2). Although all the Balkan countries have now offered solutions for Ukrainian citizens to reside legally since the beginning of the Ukraine war, the available statistics show that, by the end of 2022, most Ukrainian migrants had chosen to remain in countries immediately neighbouring Ukraine or continue to countries in Western Europe (see Figure 2).

Country	Persons with temporary protection	Refugees
Albania	-	2 342
Bosnia and Herzegovina	-	363
Croatia	20 164	20 164
Greece	20 955	20 955
Montenegro	7 622	32 250
North Macedonia	-	6 350
Serbia	1 147	2 693
Kosovo	15	n/a

FIGURE 2 Ukrainian asylum seekers in Balkan countries in 2022.

NOTE: The Kosovan Interior Ministry provided separate data for Kosovo, as the UNHCR provides an overall number for both Serbia and Kosovo. As of June 2022, there were 363 refugees from Ukraine in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁰

SOURCE: UNHCR, Operational Data Portal – Ukraine Refugee Situation

For example, in Serbia, approximately 18 000 Ukrainians entered in the first months of the war. Before Serbia granted them temporary protection in EU countries, Ukrainian citizens used the so-called 'visa-run model' to extend their stay after the legally prescribed 90 days had expired. The visa-run involves travelling to the border of a neighbouring country, typically North Macedonia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then exiting and re-entering Serbia. Thus, Ukrainian citizens would be able to legally reside in Serbia for another three months. (Later, Russian citizens fleeing conscription in Russia started using the same visa-run model to extend their stay in Serbia.) Between March and May 2022, the number of Ukrainian residents in Serbia was estimated at 10 000, many living with relatives from the Ukrainian minority in the province of Vojvodina and a few accommodated in asylum centres.³¹

Although the refugee flow from Ukraine to the Western Balkan countries was smaller than in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, the strained border authorities' resources in those three countries adversely affected the control of Serbia's borders with them. According to Serbian civil society activists working with asylum seekers, crossing into Hungary from Serbia has become much more effortless.³² Reportedly, the average number of attempts a migrant will successfully make to cross the border between Serbia and Hungary dropped from 12 or 13 in previous years to four or five between June and August 2022. In 2022, smugglers stopped digging tunnels, and irregular migrants could instead pass over the border fence using ladders or simply cut through the fence.³³ Reduced border police presence also made the Serbian–Romanian border easier to cross in 2022.³⁴ On the other hand, the Ukraine war has had minimal impact on people smuggling dynamics in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania. There is no information about the involvement of Ukrainian citizens in migrant smuggling networks in Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkan countries.



IRREGULAR MIGRANT FLOWS FROM THE MENA REGION

Frontex reports that the number of irregular migrants from the MENA region who arrived in the EU along the Western Balkan route in 2022 reached 145 600, an increase of 136% compared to 2021.³⁵ At the same time, the official figures for the two main entry points for the same route, Bulgaria and Greece, in stark contrast with Frontex statistics, recorded a combined total of only 37 507 apprehended irregular migrants (18 780 in Greece and 18 729 in Bulgaria).³⁶ Indeed, the official statistics of Bulgarian and Greek interior ministries cover only a fragment of the overall number of people smuggled along the Balkan route in a given year, since many of the illegal border crossings remain undetected. Moreover, estimating the size of the overall irregular flows through the different countries and along the route as a whole remains challenging given the scarce, incomplete and non-uniform national statistics.

The discrepancies between the recorded numbers of irregular migrants from the Balkan countries and the official statistics published by international organizations such as Frontex exemplify the need to find more accurate ways of assessing irregular migrant flows through the region. In 2017, the Center for the Study of Democracy suggested a new method for producing a more robust estimate of the overall irregular migrant flow through Bulgaria, drawing on the official statistics produced by the Bulgarian Interior Ministry.³⁷ The estimate of the overall irregular migration flow transiting Bulgaria can be used to extrapolate the size of the flows through the rest of the Balkan countries.



Migrants arrive by dinghy at the island of Lesbos, Greece, after crossing from Turkey. © Freedom House via Flickr

Estimate of the number of irregular migrants crossing Bulgaria

This estimation draws on the annual statistics of the Interior Ministry on the number of irregular migrants detained at 'entry', 'inland' and 'exit' points in Bulgaria. The data for migrants apprehended at 'exit' provides information about the number of people not yet registered in the European automated fingerprint identification system (AFIS). Assuming that police have registered all intercepted migrants in AFIS, the percentage of unregistered individuals upon 'exit' can be used as an indicator of the overall percentage of undetected irregular border crossings that occurred during the year. Thus, the size of the hidden flow is calculated by multiplying the number of all intercepted migrants with AFIS records at entry, inland and exit by a coefficient inversely proportional to the ratio between apprehended migrants with AFIS registration and all apprehended migrants. The size of the overall flow is the sum of the estimate for undetected irregular migrants and the reported number of registered migrants. ■

Flows through the Western Balkans

According to official registrations by the Bulgarian Interior Ministry, the overall number of people who entered Bulgaria irregularly in 2022 and were apprehended is 18 729.³⁸ The data also shows that the proportion of irregular migrants apprehended at 'exit' without AFIS records was 55%. Using the percentage of unregistered migrants upon 'exit' as a metric for the number of undetected migrants who transited Bulgaria, we can estimate that approximately 15 000 to 17 000 people passed through the country in 2022 without being detected by police. Adding registered and unregistered irregular migrants, we can calculate that the overall number of irregular migrants who entered and transited Bulgaria in 2022 is between 35 000 and 37 000. According to Bulgarian police officers, about 90% of irregular migrants continued their journey to central Europe via Serbia, and about 10% travelled via Romania.³⁹

At the other main gateway to the Balkans, Greece, there were 18 780 officially registered irregular migrants in 2022.⁴⁰ Given the lack of publicly accessible granulated data, a possible way to develop a rough estimate of the overall irregular migrant flow through Greece is to extrapolate using the available data from Bulgaria and Serbia, as the two irregular migrant streams from Greece and Bulgaria converge in Serbia. Interviews with Serbian experts indicate that, in 2022, 30% of migrants to the country came from Bulgaria, 50% from Greece and 20% arrived directly in Serbia (by air).⁴¹

Accordingly, if the Bulgarian estimate about the size of the irregular migrant flow from Bulgaria to Serbia is extrapolated using these expert assessments, then the number of irregular migrants from Greece to Serbia would amount to between 53 000 and 56 000. Furthermore, the overall number of irregular migrants transiting Serbia in 2022 would be between 105 000 and 111 000. This figure is close to the 145 000 irregular border crossings through the Western Balkan route that Frontex officially reports. Arguably, the difference comes from the flows transiting from Romania to Hungary and from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia to Austria (see Figure 4). Overall, the produced country-level estimates reconcile with Frontex statistics and, at the same time, provide a better understanding of the size of the flows transiting the different Balkan countries.

According to the official data from the Serbian Interior Ministry, the number of irregular border crossings between January and September 2022 was 26 719, an increase of 125% compared to the same period in 2021.⁴² There is no official data on the size of the different migrant flows entering Serbia from neighbouring countries. However, one can indirectly assess the increase in migrant flows in 2022 based on official data from other Balkan countries. All except for Albania recorded a rise in migrant flows from the MENA region in 2022, although the overall picture is challenging to interpret given the lack of data for all Balkan countries (see Figure 3).

Country	Detained migrants		Increase (%)	
	Q1-Q3 2021	Q1-Q3 2022		
Turkey	162 996	278 313	70.7	
Albania	133	87	-34.6	
Bulgaria	9 674	14 427	49.1	
Kosovo	499	714	43.1	
Montenegro	290	584	101.4	
Romania	1 327	-	-	
Serbia	11 871	26 719	125.1	
Prevented irregular entries at the state border				
North Macedonia	15 715	20 544	30.7	
Serbia	17 616	42 037	138.6	
		Q1-Q4 2021	Q1-Q4 2022	
Hungary		122 000	263 000	115.6

FIGURE 3 Detained migrants and prevented irregular entries into Balkan countries, 2021 and 2022.

NOTE: Data for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia is not included in the table, as the interior ministries did not provide official data.⁶¹

SOURCE: Official statistics provided by national authorities upon submitted requests for information

Regarding prices charged to MENA migrants seeking people smuggling services through the Western Balkan route, the information collected was sparse and contradictory. Significantly more data was available for the cost of crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border,⁴³ but little – and, indeed, contradictory – information was provided concerning the cost of transit through the other Balkan countries. The absence of data makes it difficult to accurately assess overall revenues generated by this criminal market.

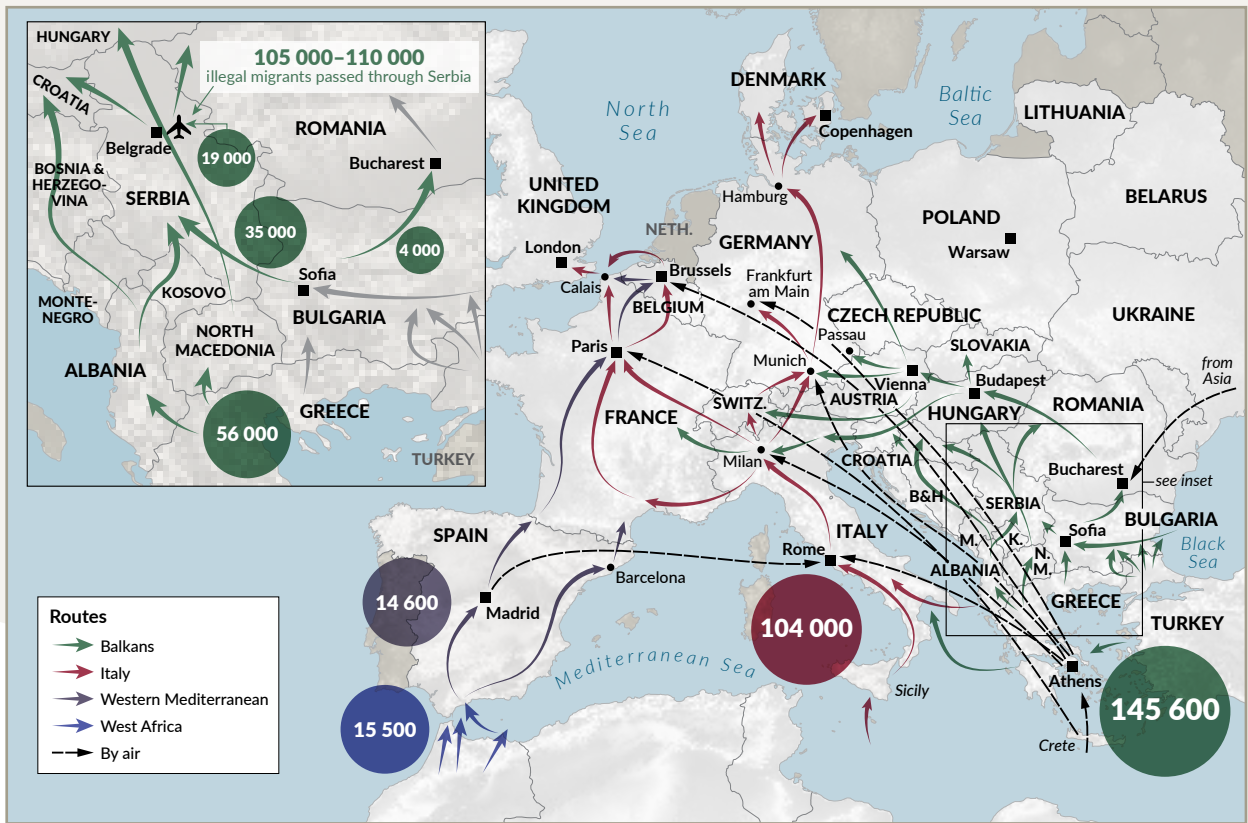


FIGURE 4 People smuggling routes through Europe in 2022.

SOURCE: Based on data from Frontex and national authorities



EMERGING TRENDS

The surge of irregular migrants along the Western Balkan route in 2022 raised questions about the social organization of illegal border crossings in the region. Despite emerging trends, the core mechanisms of irregular migration to Europe have changed little and continue to rely on the symbiosis between diaspora and human smuggling networks.⁴⁴ The overwhelming majority of irregular migrants depend on both networks, while only a small share use just one of the two.

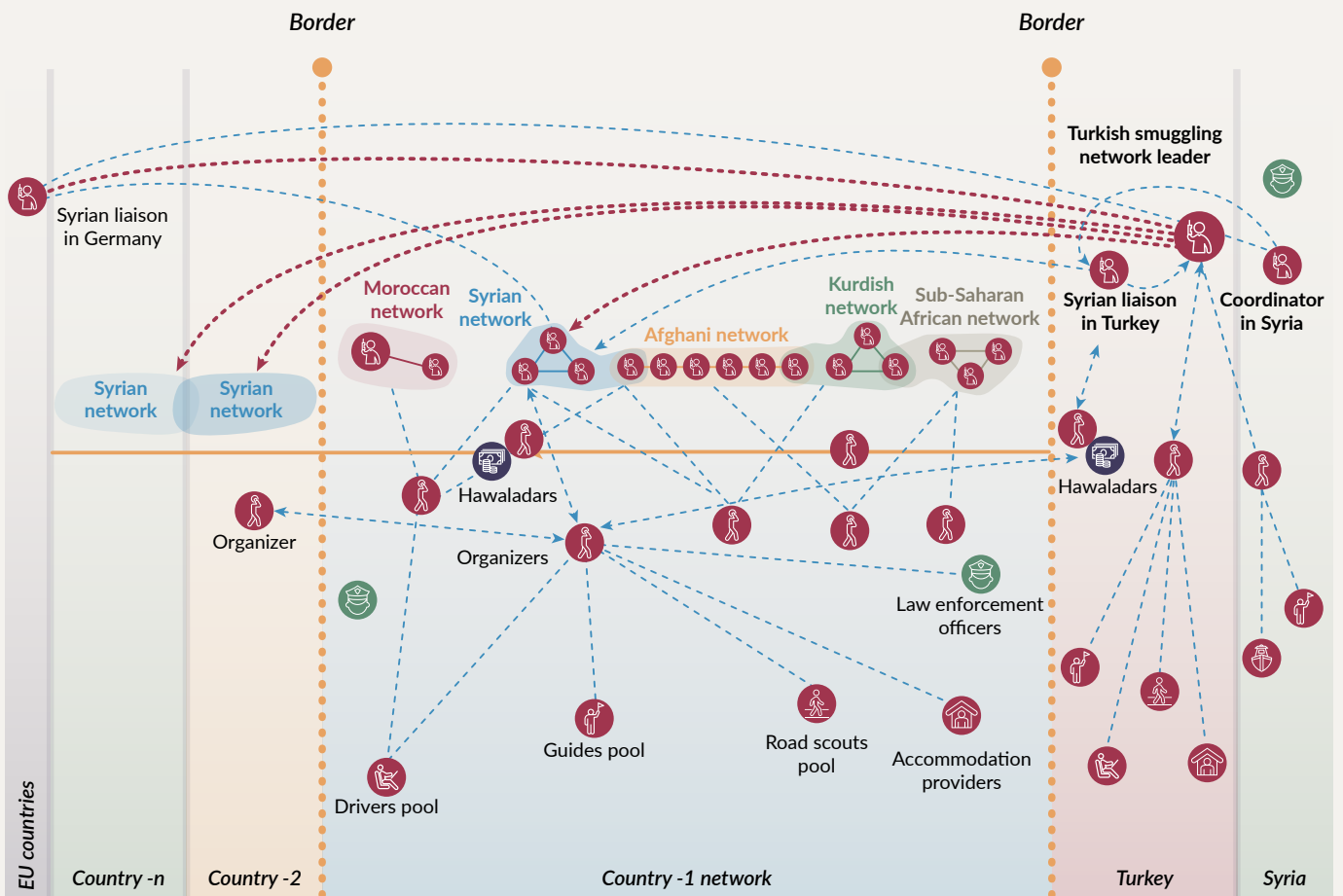
Diaspora networks typically involve people from migrant diasporas in the countries along the migration route and in destination countries, including extended family, friends and fellow citizens. Diaspora members actively share information on social platforms and in chat groups to help their compatriots find the best route to reach their desired destination country. Using diaspora networks, migrants can travel considerable distances without relying on the services of criminal networks. However, due to the stricter border and immigration control in Bulgaria and Romania, transiting these two countries is only possible with the aid of smuggling networks. In other Balkan countries, choke points include certain borders, such as the borders between Serbia and Hungary or Serbia and Romania, where migrants must seek help from smugglers.

The social organization of human smuggling networks

The networks specializing in people smuggling in the Balkans differ from traditional criminal organizations. They usually have a 'loose structure' and do not exist sustainably over time, as the participants often team up on a specific task (e.g. smuggling a particular group of migrants) before disbanding. It is typical for human smuggling organizers to work with a wide range of contractors for the same role and involve different people in each smuggling operation. The usual make-up of a migrant smuggling network is shown in Figure 5.⁴⁵

No matter how loose the networks are, there is always a degree of subordination. For example, coordinators or experienced criminal leaders in people smuggling constitute the highest layer of the networks, followed in importance by financial intermediaries (*hawaladars*) to whom migrants must trust their money. In the middle layer are the local organizers, who negotiate the operational details of the journeys. The local organizers coordinate the work of the lowest level of actors, including the guides who escort the migrants. The use of guides decreased significantly in 2022, with the heightened use of mobile applications. Local organizers may also elicit the help of corrupt border officers to enable passage through checkpoints.

Other notable actors include drivers and landlords, both roles occupied by local nationals in most Balkan countries (while smuggling networks usually provide guides). While diaspora members typically occupy the high and middle levels, in some countries, such as Bulgaria, the lowest-level roles are increasingly tasked to diaspora members. ■



Organizer	Hawala (money)	Law enforcement	Drivers
Guides	Road scouts	Boats	Accommodation providers

FIGURE 5 The social organization of migrant smuggling networks.

SOURCE: Center for the Study of Democracy

Asylum seekers at Idomeni railway station, a few metres from the borderline between Greece and Northern Macedonia. © Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via Getty Images



The Western Balkan route

There are three main patterns of interaction between diaspora networks and people smuggling networks in the Balkan countries. The first concerns countries with which Turkey has relaxed visa policies, such as Iran, Morocco and Tunisia. Typically, the migrant, with the help of family members, will pay for a flight to Turkey (with a low-cost airline) and accommodation there and arrange further assistance from the diaspora network when needed. After arriving in Turkey, migrants approach trusted smugglers to help them navigate the more challenging legs of the journey. After contacting a smuggling network coordinator, migrants organize the journey to Western Europe by land. As a rule, they pay for the trip in instalments, remitting payments at specific points along the route. The migrant or family of migrants trusts the agreed amount or part of the amount to a *hawaladar*. Then, the migrants contact the organizer responsible for coordinating entry into and movement through the next country on the route, either Greece or Bulgaria. Migrants then pay the agreed instalment upon covering a particular stage of the journey before establishing contact with the organizers of the next step of the trip. Migrants can sometimes obtain free overland transport through diaspora members in certain Balkan countries. Diaspora members may also provide them with temporary accommodation.

The second pattern is typical for migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, and other countries for which Turkey has a more restrictive visa policy. In this case, migrants pay smuggling networks from the beginning of the journey to cross the Turkish border and move through the country. They travel exclusively by land, usually in vehicles arranged by smugglers, and sometimes also walking substantial distances. Upon reaching Bulgaria or Greece, they follow the same approach as the migrants in the first model, a combination of help from diaspora networks and payment to smuggling networks. Migrants from some African and Asian countries use a third method to reduce the number of Balkan borders they have to cross. This involves flying directly to Serbia or to another Balkan country with a relaxed visa policy with the migrant's home country. Then, with the help of diaspora networks and through payment to smuggling networks, migrants cross Serbia's border with Hungary, Romania or Croatia.

Common to all of the models used along the Western Balkan route is that the journey occurs in stages. This is because migrants rarely have all the money needed to reach their target countries in a single trip, and because passing through some of the border points requires additional time and financial resources. For example, a migrant's journey could be interrupted due to police detention. Although the preferred option is to transit an entire Balkan country without stopping, migrants may also stay temporarily at asylum centres after irregularly crossing into a particular country. This usually happens

if migrants are apprehended or voluntarily turn themselves in to authorities to claim asylum. In such a case, they have two options. The first is to use asylum centres as free places to stay and wait until they can organize the transport for the next stage of their journey. The second option is to wait until their refugee status application is processed (in Greece, Bulgaria or another EU country). If a migrant obtains refugee status, they can travel freely to the desired EU country. The publicly available data does not allow for an estimation of the exact number of transiting irregular migrants who apply for refugee status in each Balkan country.

Adaptation and evolution of human smuggling networks

The interviews conducted with a number of experts for this study show that there have been significant organizational changes in smuggling networks since the refugee crisis of 2015/16. During the first migrant crisis, the high-level coordinators of Balkan networks typically resided in port towns, predominantly Istanbul and Thessaloniki. In Turkey, five or six people⁴⁶ reportedly coordinated the movement of migrants to Turkey, then through the Balkan countries and sometimes even to their final destination in Western and northern Europe. Likewise, criminal leaders with significant influence and established reputations in the people smuggling market acted as coordinators at other key transit points, primarily Libya and Egypt,⁴⁷ as well as in other MENA countries. In 2015/16, typically, people smuggling networks operated on a national principle (i.e. Syrian networks smuggled Syrians). Interviewed law enforcement officers shared that, back then, local organizers of these criminal networks resided in the Balkan countries and most often were of the same nationality as the migrants they smuggled.⁴⁸ These organizers negotiated with lower-level actors, usually citizens of the respective countries.

In 2022, due to the increased demand for smuggling services by people from the MENA region, many new criminal actors ventured in, and networks became much more fluid and decentralized. Many local people smugglers in the Balkan countries started to make direct arrangements for smuggling operations with their counterparts from neighbouring countries without necessarily going through the high-level coordinators in Istanbul. They would typically use encrypted mobile internet applications to negotiate details such as roles, logistics and price of services for each operation, wherein the good reputation of the criminal actors played a crucial role when striking agreements.

The composition of people smuggling groups also changed significantly in 2022. During the 2015/16 migrant crisis, most people smuggling actors were nationals of Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia and other Balkan countries operating within their respective countries. In 2022, more foreign nationals became involved in people smuggling operations. In Greece, for example, migrants are now being transported in vehicles driven predominantly by citizens of neighbouring Balkan countries (including Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Albanian and Serbia). The perpetrators in North Macedonia were also local or nationals from neighbouring Balkan countries.

In Bulgaria, migrants from Afghanistan have taken up roles once held by Bulgarians, such as 'guides' – those who take migrant groups across the Turkish border into Bulgaria and then across the Bulgarian border into Serbia. According to police officers interviewed, between June and August 2022, most drivers apprehended in Bulgaria while transporting irregular migrants were foreign nationals.⁴⁹ Drivers from Turkey and neighbouring Balkan countries, including Romania, North Macedonia and Serbia, predominated. The Bulgarian police also detected a third substantial pool of drivers, made up of Ukrainians, Georgians and Moldovans, with drivers from Poland, Slovakia and Western Europe also present. An increasing number of drivers are former irregular migrants who have been residing in Bulgaria for several years.

In Bulgaria, police are more frequently encountering people smuggling organizations in which non-Bulgarian citizens are responsible for all roles, ranging from the organizers of the migrant groups to the landlords providing illegal accommodation. People smuggling networks often employ migrants legally residing in the countries along the Balkan route. Some of these migrants have even returned to the Balkans from countries in Western Europe and now hold legal EU or UK identity documents. Former migrants perform almost all organizational roles, including recruiters in asylum centres, transporters, landlords and organizers. The situation is similar in other Balkan countries, including Serbia and North Macedonia. In Serbia, for example, transporters and landlords are mainly Serbian nationals. The transport organization usually involves people of the same country of origin as the migrants. During the leg of the journey leaving Serbia, those who help migrants cross the fence at the Hungarian border are exclusively foreigners, primarily Afghans and Moroccans.⁵⁰

Perhaps most noteworthy, 2022 saw a significant increase in the use of encrypted mobile phone applications by smuggling networks.⁵¹ The organizers of the smuggling process usually oversee the activity remotely through mobile platforms and are not usually residents of the country through which smuggling occurs. Communication with specific migrant groups has shifted heavily to these apps. In the migrant crisis of 2015/16, smuggling networks mainly communicated using phone calls, enabling police to track and investigate them easily. Tracking and investigation have become extremely difficult with the encryption offered by mobile platforms.⁵²

In 2021 and 2022, mobile applications drove the recruitment and coordination of specific roles for migrant smuggling operations. Irregular migrants and migrant communities in destination countries also intensively use closed groups on WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and Viber, or Telegram channels, to share their experiences and opinions about the leaders of particular smuggling networks and their services. The largest known WhatsApp group had about 90 000 members at one point in 2022. Most stages of the smuggling process now rely on coordination through mobile platforms.

Unlike in 2015/16, guides are now less likely to accompany smuggled groups, thereby avoiding the risk of apprehension by border guard authorities. Instead, they will provide migrant groups with maps and coordinates, instructing one or more of the migrants in the group about the route they should use to cross a country's border on foot. The group will then travel using a mobile GPS application to reach a specific point where drivers will collect them for transportation to a city where they will wait for the next stage of the journey.

The recruitment of drivers is the most visible component of the smuggling process. Typically, organizers post adverts on closed groups on Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, as well as using Telegram, Twitter (now X) and WhatsApp. They typically publish the adverts in online groups and channels popular in the particular Balkan country through which the transfer will occur. However, similar adverts have also been seen on Ukrainian, Georgian and Moldovan groups and channels. The adverts list the transport cost and offer contact details for access using a different mobile application.⁵³ The smuggling networks typically coordinate participants through more secure applications such as Signal and Telegram. Migrants also use Messenger and Facebook groups to exchange information and share experiences from their journeys.

Another trend gaining momentum concerns popular modes of payment. Although migrants and smugglers still rely on the *hawala* system, electronic applications such as the money-transfer platform Revolut are becoming increasingly popular for paying drivers (mainly citizens from Eastern Europe and the Balkan countries). In addition, there is a much greater use of fast money-transfer companies, with smugglers integrating themselves into the community and using locals and their ID cards to transfer money from other countries.



Hungarian police officers patrol the Hungarian–Serbian border, close to the village of Kelebia. In August 2022, the Hungarian government committed to strengthening its border fence in response to increased migration flows.

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Another concerning development discussed during the police interviews and in many media reports is smugglers' much more violent behaviour in 2022,⁵⁴ between smugglers themselves and between smugglers and the police. The trend towards aggressive behaviour has been visible in Greece and North Macedonia since 2016/17, but in 2022, the situation worsened in many Balkan countries.

In Bulgaria, the observed trend was increased violent resistance to police. There were three violent incidents involving migrant smugglers in 2022, with four police officers killed and many others injured. One police officer was shot dead at the Bulgarian border, and three police officers were killed while trying to stop vehicles transporting migrants.⁵⁵ Several vehicle chases resulted in road accidents in 2022, and a smuggler driving a van carrying irregular migrants lost his life.⁵⁶

Similar incidents were observed in other Balkan countries. Experts interviewed in Kosovo reported violence between people smuggling networks, although migrants generally enjoy the population's sympathy in Kosovo. However, the conflicts between the two main migrant smuggling networks – Kurdish and North African (Moroccan and Algerian) – periodically lead to outbreaks of violence, with some smugglers resorting to the use of weapons in the clashes. Reportedly, one of the incidents led to the killing of a migrant smuggler. Serbia also witnessed an increase in violence among people smuggling networks in 2022.⁵⁷

Various forms of violence towards migrants exist in connection with people smuggling, but most incidents occur when migrants attempt to cross the fence without paying for the service. Interviewed experts revealed that tensions between smuggling groups bringing migrants across the Serbian–Hungarian border were present long before the notorious Horgos shooting at the border in November 2022,⁵⁸ in which six people were injured. The subsequent police search of the smugglers' camps resulted in the retrieval of several automatic weapons, pistols and ammunition. Hungary also observed increasing aggression and use of violence in 2022, with 15 police officers and 29 officers of the national guard allegedly injured during the year.⁵⁹ An interviewed police officer from Croatia reported similar incidents of violence at the borders with Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁰ The increase in violence is a trend of great concern. It is having, and will continue to have, adverse implications for human rights and the safety of irregular migrants. It is also likely that violence will translate into further tightening of immigration and border controls, pushing irregular migrants to undertake even more dangerous journeys and increasing dependence on people smugglers.



CONCLUSION

In 2022, the war in Ukraine and the resulting flow of Ukrainian refugees into Europe affected irregular migration along the Western Balkan route. However, the impact was indirect and related primarily to the need for countries neighbouring Ukraine to swiftly reallocate additional resources to their borders. Romania and Hungary moved to reassign border guard personnel and reallocate funding from the country's borders with Serbia and Bulgaria. The redistribution of staff and resources made it easier for migrants to cross the Hungarian–Serbian, Hungarian–Romanian and Turkish–Bulgarian borders. Nonetheless, analysis shows that the war in Ukraine is only a contributing factor to the developments on the Western Balkan route in 2022. The relaxation of movement restrictions after the COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening political and economic situation in Turkey and the MENA region are the main push factors for the surge of irregular border crossings in 2022.

The ways in which smuggling networks adapted to the measures implemented by the Balkan countries to curb the migrant crisis of 2015/16 have also played a significant role in the emerging trends seen in 2022. Transnational human smuggling networks now operate in a significantly more complex and flexible way than during this earlier wave of irregular migration. Smuggling networks have managed to entrench themselves into migrants' diasporic networks, thus making it challenging to distinguish between them. The employment of foreign citizens in people smuggling operations also poses significant challenges for law enforcement authorities. In most cases, these foreign citizens have been recruited through the internet to drive a group of migrants from point A to point B without knowing the actual organizers. Therefore, arresting them helps little to investigate the perpetrators at the root of the people smuggling operations.

Another challenge is the increased use of encrypted mobile applications to recruit migrants and coordinate smuggling activities. As a result, law enforcement actors in the Balkan countries can penetrate only the most visible layer of smuggling: low-level organizers. The insufficient cross-border cooperation between the police and judicial institutions of the countries along the Western Balkan route precludes the effective countering of these increasingly sophisticated organized criminal networks and illicit financial flows related to the smuggling of irregular migrants.

Further complicating the situation, data on irregular migrants crossing the Western Balkan route is not collected in a standardized way across the region, making it difficult to assess the actual scale of irregular migration in the Balkans. At the end of 2022, the lack of objective country-level estimates on the size of irregular migration flows led to political tensions and accusations at the EU level about the lack of adequate border and immigration control in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia. Eventually, Austria



In 2022, migration through the Balkans increased as a result of greater irregular migration from the MENA region and the influx of refugees fleeing Ukraine.

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vetoed the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen area, citing as its reason for doing so the significant number of irregular migrants transiting the two countries. Bulgaria and Romania sharply criticized the data presented by the Austrian government as justification for their decision.

The stark increase in irregular migration flows from the MENA region transiting the Balkan countries during 2022 was driven by many political, social and economic advancements in countries of origin, transit and destination. The current analysis does not examine these developments in detail, as the primary emphasis has been on the repercussions of the war in Ukraine. The Russian aggression triggered an immense refugee wave from Ukraine into all European countries, and Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary were among the most affected in South Eastern Europe. The EU and Western Balkan countries were quick to accept and provide means for protection and legal residence to all Ukrainian refugees arriving in their territory, thus taking a clearly different approach to the one applied towards the unauthorized arrivals of MENA-region irregular migrants usually facilitated by people smuggling networks. However, the developments in 2022 demonstrated that these two migratory flows impact each other, and it is likely that they will continue to do so. This entanglement of authorized and unauthorized migration flows has specific implications for the overall operations of Balkan smuggling networks and trends in irregular migrant flows in the near future.

A quick end to the war will eliminate the risk of a new wave of Ukrainians fleeing their country and thus reduce the risk in front-line and transit countries for straining the resources of border control and immigration agencies. It could also facilitate more effective tackling of human smuggling networks and eventually reduce the size of the irregular migration flow. Conversely, an escalation of the war and the loss of large territories by Ukraine could lead to new, sizeable waves of Ukrainian refugees. Accordingly, the work of border and immigration control agencies will be hampered, and this is likely to create opportunities for human smuggling networks to expand their operations and increase the number of MENA-region immigrants transiting through the Balkan route.

The most realistic scenario, for the time being, seems to be continued fighting for another year or two. The pattern of Ukrainian migration would stay the same, as observed in 2022 – women, children and the elderly would leave Ukraine in the winter months and return to their communities in the spring. While the EU border police have already adapted to this pattern, the large number of Ukrainian asylum seekers would continue to require additional resources at the EU's eastern borders and indirectly facilitate irregular migration from the MENA region. The ongoing war effort would also drain Ukrainian law enforcement resources, and cooperation with their EU counterparts in combating people smuggling networks in which Ukrainian citizens are involved would therefore remain a low priority.



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