Open gates to fortress Europe? Migrant smuggling through the states of former Yugoslavia

Marcus Wieschhoff

Introduction
Porous borders, the lack of visa requirements, and an extensive criminal network have enabled scores of migrants from various countries in Asia and the Middle East to make their way into Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Slovenia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), most of them with the intention of moving on to an EU member state, thus becoming illegal immigrants in the receiving country. In addition, stranded migrants pose a problem for the transit countries, which are both logistically and financially caught by surprise by the sudden increase of cases. Finally, a humanitarian crisis is about to develop, as migrants are taking considerable risks, which have already led to several incidents similar to the tragic events in Dover. This article attempts to analyse the nature of the phenomenon and to highlight the consequences for transit and destination countries as well as the smuggled migrants themselves.

Definitions
A discussion of the solutions to the problematic nature of irregular migration is often defeated by confusion over the terminology. The term ‘irregular migration’ as it is used in this text describes uncontrolled migratory behaviour by individuals or groups in general. As the case of BiH illustrates, this behaviour does not necessarily have to include illegal activities carried out by the migrant. The migration of an individual travelling without a visa from Teheran to Frankfurt only becomes illegal upon crossing the BiH-Croatian border, since there are no visa requirements for citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran to enter BiH. Moreover, a group or an individual accepting the services of criminals in their attempt to illegally cross borders is not automatically ‘trafficked’. Migrant ‘trafficking’ comprises the threat or use of abduction or force and physical and psychological abuse, whereas migrant ‘smuggling’ procures profit for assisting illegal entry or transit into or through a state.

---

1 The author is Migration Consultant at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), currently operating out of Sarajevo. From 1999 to 2000 he served as an official of the International Organisation for Migration, managing the Organisation’s operational activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He acknowledges with great appreciation the valuable comments on drafts of this article made by Marcus Guardian of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sarajevo and Robert Bell at UNICEF, Copenhagen.

2 On 18 June, 2000 in Dover 58 Chinese (54 men and 4 women) were found dead in the back of a tomato truck registered in the Netherlands. All the victims had died of asphyxiation in what was described as a ‘hermetically sealed container’.

3 For a detailed etymological account of the terminology see: Jennifer Hogarth and John Salt, ‘Theoretical Developments’, in: David Thompson (ed.), Migrant trafficking and human
Actors

The migrants
There are two main groups of irregular migrants, one entering the region legally through BiH’s international airports, the other arriving in Belgrade. The first group consists mainly of migrants from Iran, Turkey and Tunisia, permitted to enter BiH without a visa. Most of these migrants try to cross the border into Croatia within 24 hours of arrival. From January to December 2000 more than 28,000 migrants entered BiH as tourists through Sarajevo’s international airport, though less than a quarter departed during the same period. In many cases planes returned to Istanbul or Teheran almost empty. The second group consists mainly of Chinese nationals, arriving in Belgrade by direct flight from Beijing. Chinese migrants can rely on an extensive network of overseas Chinese communities in most of the transit countries. The main routes into Western Europe are roughly the same for both groups: through Croatia, Slovenia, Italy or Austria and then preferably to Germany, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom. To the classical set of push and pull factors, one must add favourable conditions in countries of transit, such as visa-free regimes. Easy transit has itself turned into a major pull factor for migrants.

Transit countries
Slovenia is by far the most advanced of the transit countries in terms of border protection and the management of entry and exit of foreigners. The Slovenian authorities are highly motivated to meet the Schengen criteria as soon as possible since they represent one of the major hurdles on the way to EU membership. It is not surprising that Slovenia has developed a special concern for migration relations with its former Yugoslav neighbours. Recent efforts on the part of regional governments have concentrated on reaching readmission agreements with BiH and Croatia and persuading BiH to drop its visa-free regime with several ‘problematic countries’.

The further from Slovenia geographically, the further away the countries are from possible EU membership and the less motivated are even EU optimistic governments to meet Schengen-like criteria. Politicians in FYROM know that at least another decade will pass before EU membership for their country will be seriously considered, hence efforts concentrate on more urgent, domestic issues. Thus Croatia has started to move in this respect.

A readmission agreement with BiH was reached in July 2000 under which up to mid-December 2000 Croatia has expelled 4,676 irregular migrants from Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, India, Pakistan, China, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon,

---

4 Source: State Border Service of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
5 Source: Ibid.

*Helsinki Monitor 2001 no. 1*