



**EVRO-ATLANTSKI SVET SLOVENIJE**  
**EURO-ATLANTIC COUNCIL OF SLOVENIA**

# MIGRATION FLOWS IN THE BALKANS

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Review of media coverage April-May 2020 in Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia.

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## Foreword

BRIN NAJŽER (*Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia*)

Medtem ko se je ves svet boril s posledicami poskusov zaježitve širjenja novega korona virusa spomladi 2020, so se države na Balkanu sočasno bile prisiljene spoprijeti z izzivom nezakonitih migracij po t.i. »Balkanski poti«. Medijsko poročanje se je v času epidemije osredotočilo skoraj izključno na vprašanja povezana z epidemijo, medtem ko so mnoge druge teme ostajale v ozadju. Namen tega poročila je zapolniti to pomanjkanje v poročanju ter dvigniti raven ozaveščenosti tako odločevalcev, kot tudi splošne javnosti, o problematiki nezakonitih migracij tudi v tem času. Avtorji poročila so se osredotočili predvsem na lokalno medijsko poročanje v posameznih državah na poti, z začetkom v Grčiji, in nato preko Severne Makedonije, Srbije, in Bosne in Hercegovine na Hrvaško. Namen analize podatkov iz lokalnega poročanja je prikaz celostne slike stanja migracij ter vpogleda v to, kaj trenutno stanje pomeni za prihodnost. Vprašanje nezakonitih migracij je namreč eno najbolj ključnih v Evropi in važno je vedeti, kam bo vodilo trenutno stanje na Balkanu ko se bodo varnostni ukrepi proti širjenju korona virusa sprostil in bo gibanje migrantov lažje.

Whilst the world was dealing with the consequences of the various efforts to stem the spread of the new coronavirus in the Spring of 2020 there was a distinct lack of emphasis on another issue which was simmering below the surface in the Balkans and which could have a significant impact on the situation in Europe more broadly. That issue was, of course, illegal migration flows from the Middle East, via Turkey, and through the “Balkan route” onwards into the rest of Europe. This report seeks to address this lack of coverage of this important issue through the analysis of media reporting from within the states which lie on the path of the route, from Greece, through North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to Croatia. Each of these states has been affected by illegal migration while having to simultaneously deal with a global epidemic. The emphasis was on seeking out local media reports to give a picture of the situation on the ground though the months of April and May 2020. From this data, a brief analysis can then be made as to what the current situation is and how is it likely to develop. The goal of this report is to clarify the illegal migration situation along the “Balkan route” with a view of helping decisionmakers and the general public to have a better overview as to what can be expected in the following months as the medical situation eases and migration flows start moving again.

# 1 Greece

NINA VOGEL (*Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia*)

*Za razliko od drugih držav, ki so v luči sedanje korona krize dale manjši pomen migrantski problematiki, jo Grčija še vedno obravnava kot eno izmed temeljnih groženj njeni nacionalni varnosti. Bilateralni odnosi s Turčijo so se znatno poslabšali, kar je pomembno tako za migrantsko, kot tudi za korona krizo.*

*In contrast to several other countries, which, in the light of the current corona crisis, have diminished the importance of the migrant crisis, Greece still perceives it as a fundamental threat to its national security. Bilateral relations with Turkey have substantially deteriorated, which is important both for the migration crisis as well as the corona crisis.*

The coronavirus, which plagued the world in recent months, has immobilized several aspects of our lives. At the peak of the pandemic, we were overwhelmed by reports of casualties and infections, safety measures which came into effect and so on. Other topics, which were otherwise immensely important to us, have been largely ignored. The reports about migrant routes and illegal crossings faded into the background in comparison to the Covid- 19 crisis. Due to the aforementioned factors, the main objective of the following short paper is to analyse reports of the Greek media about refugees and illegal migrants in the period between 1 April and 31 May 2020

On 10 April, Greek media reported on a video showing a Turkish Coast Guard crew, crashing into a boat carrying refugees. In the video, the Turkish Coast Guards can be seen hitting people, including women and children, with sticks and ropes. The Turkish vessel created dangerous waves near the boat, which could have caused it to overturn.<sup>1</sup>

Protothema was reporting about Turkey's plan to push migrants infected with the Covid- 19 virus towards Greece and Europe amid the pandemic. A number of migrants were allegedly being transported by buses from camps in the interior, to the west coast of Turkey with the intention of granting them passage with dinghies to Greece. The Turkish military and police appear to be actively involved in the plan by directing and leading them.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of April, there were several reports from European countries accepting unaccompanied minors to their territory. This is a part of a wider EU plan to relocate 1600 unaccompanied minors to EU member states, from refugee centres on Greek islands. One of

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1Protothema. (2020, April 10th). Τούρκοι λιμενικοί χτυπούν μετανάστες μέσα σε βάρκα - Δείτε βίντεο-τοκουμέντο.

2 Protothema. (2020, April 11th). Κορωνοϊός: Η Τουρκία επιχειρεί να προωθήσει στην Ελλάδα ασθενείς μετανάστες.

those countries was Finland, which accepted one hundred unaccompanied children and 30 adult refugees, for family reunification.<sup>3</sup>

On 29 April, Greek authorities reported, that they prevented an attempt by Turkish Coast Guard vessels to provide an escort to a boat, carrying migrants, into Greek waters. It was stated that they located the migrant boat in Turkish waters and nearby Turkish patrol boats had ignored appeals to stop it. It was finally collected at noon by the Turkish Coast Guard. A similar incident had occurred on 18 April. Greece is planning on shaping their deterrent behaviour in the islands, due to expectation that, as the weather improves, the number of attempts by immigrants to enter their waters and land will increase. There is a relative reduction of Turkish activity on all fronts in the Aegean Sea.<sup>4</sup>

The US State Department has decided to provide additional humanitarian aid to Greece. According to the State Department, the United States will allocate \$2.45 million for the additional needs, caused by the pandemic, to refugees and migrants in Greece. This is in addition to the \$600,000 of aid, announced on 17 April.<sup>5</sup>

It was also reported that Greece will be taking steps to secure its land border with Turkey – including completing the extension of the fence along the Evros River to stop migrants from crossing into the European Union. Greek government also decided to mobilise additional forces, which they believe are necessary in the wake of remarks by Turkish officials. The Greek Foreign Minister, Mr. Nikos Dendias, also said that Greece will always be prepared to welcome initiatives aimed at de-escalation of bilateral tensions, so long as they comply with international law.<sup>6</sup>

Although the issue of migrants and refugees was forgotten in the case of Slovenia, we cannot say the same for Greece, as the tensions between Greece and Turkey actually grew during the last couple of months. It is evident that Greece, despite of the severity of the Corona crisis, still perceives illegal migration as one of the fundamental threats to its society. The current bilateral cooperation between Greece and Turkey has reached a low point, which resulted in the EU and the US taking on larger roles, in the form of financial and humanitarian aid.

Even though, as I mentioned previously, Greece still perceives migration as a big threat, a notable decline of news report of this topic has been noted. However, this decline has not been as significant as in some other countries. It can easily be predicted that the future will not bring a quick resolve to the current situation and may actually be escalated by the current Corona crisis.

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3 ΑΠΕ-ΜΠΕ. (2020, April 30th). Εκατό ασυνόδευτα παιδιά θα μετεγκατασταθούν στη Φινλανδία.

4 ΑΠΕ – ΜΠΕ. (2020, April 29th). Νέα απόπειρα προώθησης λέμβου με μετανάστες από τουρκικές ακταιωρούς στη Μυτιλήνη (βίντεο). Η ΚΑΘΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ.

5 ΑΠΕ-ΜΠΕ. (2020, May 21th). Βοήθεια \$2,45 εκατ. από ΗΠΑ για μετανάστες και πρόσφυγες στην Ελλάδα. ΕΡΤ.

6 ΝΕΔΟΣ, Β. (2020, May 27th). Ενημέρωση για τις τουρκικές προκλήσεις. Η ΚΑΘΗΜΕΡΙΝΗ.

## 2 North Macedonia

TEODORA-TEA RISTEVSKA (*Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia*)

*Makedonija je kot odziv na pandemijo razglasila izredno stanje in uvedla zelo stroge ukrepe, ki prepovedujejo prost pretok državljanov v določenem času dneva. To je pomembno vplivalo na tok nezakonitih priseljencev. Na eni strani je bilo tihotapcem težje prevažati migrante od grško-makedonske do makedonsko-srbske meje. Po drugi strani pa so nedavni dogodki pokazali, da je bilo policistom lažje najti in razkrivati tihotapce. To poročilo se osredotoča na poročanja medijev o migracijah v Makedoniji v posameznem obdobju od 1. aprila do 31. maja 2020.*

*In response to the pandemic, North Macedonia declared a state of emergency and enacted very strict measures, banning the free movement of citizens at certain times of the day. This had a significant impact on the flow of illegal immigrants. On the one hand, it was more difficult for smugglers to transport migrants from Greek-North Macedonian to North Macedonian-Serbian border. On the other hand, recent events have shown that it has been easier for police officers to find and expose smugglers. This paper focuses on media reports on migration in North Macedonia in the specific period from April 1 to May 31, 2020.*

According to the 2016 migrant deal<sup>1</sup> between Turkey and the European Union, aimed at stopping the flow of irregular migration via Turkey to Europe, Turkey has received €6 billion in financial assistance to hold 3.6 million refugees on its territory and has stopped them heading across the EU border (Greece). This mechanism proved to be somewhat effective. According to the European Commission, irregular arrivals remain 97% lower than the period before the agreement became operational, while the number of lives lost at sea has decreased substantially.<sup>2</sup>

According to official data, there are about four million refugees in Turkey, although it is said that their numbers are likely far greater. On the other hand, in Greece, according to the authorities, there are about 100,000 asylum seekers, 41,000 of them on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, North Macedonian institutions have been preparing to deal with a possible new wave of refugees and migrants, following developments on the Greek-Turkish border, but they do not expect an extreme flow of refugees similar to the one in 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> Corrao, I. (2016). *Legislative Train Schedule: Towards a new policy on Migration*. European Parliament. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2019). *EU-Turkey Statement: Three years on*. Retrieved from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20190318\\_eu-turkey-three-years-on\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20190318_eu-turkey-three-years-on_en.pdf)

Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Bujar Osmani also said that the country was ready to deal with a hypothetically new influx of refugees from Syria, but that it would have to be coordinated with FRONTEX and EU member states. Jasmin Redzepi of the "Legis" civic organization said, "Greece largely prevents refugees from crossing their territory and those who come to the islands are not allowed to reach the land and therefore there is no new crossings from Greece to North Macedonia."<sup>3</sup>

On March 18 2020, the North Macedonian president Stevo Pendarovski, informed<sup>4</sup> the Macedonian public that he had signed the Decree on declaring a state of emergency on the territory of the entire country, based on Article 125 of the North Macedonian Constitution. This decision was in force until May 27, when a decision was made to end the state of emergency. However, after 3 days, on May 30, the Government of North Macedonia declared a new nationwide state of emergency lasting until June 13, 2020. This means that most border crossings are closed, except for the transmission of necessary products.

After the Coronavirus crisis and the decree of state of emergency, the first news on illegal immigrants that was presented in the media was on May 11, 2020. According to the residents of the Morodvis, a village of Kocani, located in the northeastern part of North Macedonia, they noticed a group of migrants looking for a store to buy food. The migrants came from the direction of the Plachkovica mountain, so it is presumed that during the night they hid near the monastery above the village. Their goal was to find a way to reach the North Macedonian-Serbian border. Residents called the police, but in the meantime, the migrants escaped, leaving behind some of their personal belongings.<sup>5</sup>

One week later, on May 18, 2020, the Department of Border Affairs and Migration filed criminal charges against SM (18) and AA (28) from Strumica, with the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office for Prosecution of Organized Crime and Corruption, due to the existence of grounds for suspicion of having committed the criminal offense of "smuggling of migrants". The Ministry of Interior clarified that on 16.05.2020 at 10.30, police officers of the Department for Border Affairs and Migration on the highway Kumanovo-Border Crossing "Tabanovce" gave a sign to stop a passenger vehicle with Skopje license plates. However, the vehicle did not stop, after which, at the entrance to Kumanovo, the driver, S.M., caused a traffic accident, hitting a passenger vehicle with Kumanovo license plates. During the inspection of the passenger vehicle, eight migrants from Pakistan were found, the Ministry of Interior said in a statement on 1 June.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stojanchova, P. (2020). *Balkanskata migrantska ruta nema da se otvori*. Radio Slobodna Evropa. Retrieved from <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%B3%D1%80%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B0/30464261.html>

<sup>4</sup> Pendarovski, S. (2020). Decree for State of Emergency – Addressing remarks by the President. Pretsedatel.mk official site. Retrieved from <https://pretsedatel.mk/en/decree-for-state-of-emergency-addressing-remarks-by-president-pendarovski/>

<sup>5</sup> A1on (2020). *Grupa migrant zabeležana kaj kochanskoto selo Morodvis*. Retrieved from <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/grupa-migranti-zabelezhana-kaj-kochanskoto-selo-morodvis/>

<sup>6</sup> Opserver (2020). *Krivichna prijava za dve lica osomnicheni za krijumcharenje migranti*. Retrieved from <https://opserver.mk/crna-hronika/krivichna-prijava-za-dve-lica-osomnicheni-za-krijumcharenje-migranti/>

On May 28, 2020, threats were made against a journalist team, because it was filming a report on migrants in Vaksince, near the North Macedonian-Serbian border, i.e. the Presevo border crossing. Namely, journalist Fourkan Saliu and camera operator Ibrahim Mamuti from Klan TV were in the village of Vaksince, where they spotted and filmed a large group of immigrants moving in the region. After making the recording, they drove back to Skopje, after which a car with a Kumanovo license plate cut their way, and a man came out of it who directly threatened the journalists and asked them to delete the recordings and to not publish them.<sup>7</sup>

On May 26, it was decided that from the next day, i.e. May 27, there will be no more curfews in North Macedonia ending the ban on movement from 21:00 to 5:00 in the morning. This has further increased the presence of illegal migration in the country. In just two days, in several individual cases, the North Macedonian police discovered over 140 illegal migrants, of which the last two cases were registered on May 30.

In the first case, 113 migrants, 110 of whom were from Bangladesh, were found in a Scania refrigerator truck with Skopje license plates. The vehicle was driven by a 30-year-old citizen of Kosovo, and the police stopped him near the Greek- North Macedonian border, on the highway Gevgelija - Demir Kapija near the junction Miravci. The driver has been detained and after the case is reviewed, an appropriate charge will be filed against him.

In the second case, a group of 19 migrants was discovered a few hours earlier on the highway Demir Kapija - Negotino, near the village of Tremnik. The migrants were discovered after two vehicles, one with Skopje and the other with Struga license plates driving on the highway in the opposite direction, hit a vehicle from Negotino. The passenger was injured in the accident and was taken to the hospital in Negotino for medical treatment. The drivers of the other two vehicles fled the scene of the accident. Nineteen migrants were found nearby. During the police control, they confirmed that they had previously ridden in both vehicles. The whole case did not end there. While inspecting the accident, another car, this time with Skopje license plates whose driver is unknown, ignored the two police officers and continued to move, hitting the crashed vehicles. Even then, he did not stop but continued to move. After about a kilometer, the driver stopped, left the vehicle, and fled with the passengers. The police informed the public that measures are being taken for complete clarification of both cases.

The day before, on the road Bogdanci - Gevgelija, the police discovered another group of 13 migrants. A 22-year-old resident of Bogdanci was in charge of their transportation, who did not stop at the police sign but continued to move. He flew off the road due to unadjusted speed. At the first moment, he tried to escape, but in a short time, he was found and handed over to the Police Station in Strumica.<sup>8</sup>

It can be concluded that the ban on movement for all people in North Macedonia from 21:00 to 5:00 in the morning had a significant impact on the flow of illegal immigrants. On the one hand, it is more difficult for smugglers to transport migrants from the Greek- North

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<sup>7</sup> Ohridnews (2020). *Zakani kon novinarska ekipa zatoa shto snimala prilog za migranti vo Vaksince*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohridnews.com/zakani-kon-novinarska-ekipa-zatoa-shto-snimala-prilog-za-migranti-vo-vaksince/>

<sup>8</sup> Gjorgiev, Z. (2020). *Nad 130 migranti pronajdeni vo kamion ladilnik vo blizina na Gevgelija*. Sitel. Retrieved from <https://sitel.com.mk/nad-130-migranti-pronajdeni-vo-kamion-ladilnik-vo-blizina-na-gevgelija>



Macedonian to the North Macedonian-Serbian border. On the other hand, recent events have shown that it is easier for police officers to find and expose smugglers. The COVID-19 crisis, itself has increased society's need for increased police control and reduced the movement of citizens by car.

### 3 Serbia

#### BOR GROBELŠEK (*Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia*)

*Pojav Covida-19 je naredil zadeve povezane z migrantsko populacijo v Srbiji še bolj kompleksne. V medijih lahko zasledimo povečanje napetosti, večjo intenziteto policijskega nadzora ter protimigrantskih stališč. Še posebej pa je opaženo povečanje pojava lažnih novic ter podobnih kampanj, ki ciljajo na migrante.*

*The emergence of Covid-19 has complicated matters related to migrants in Serbia further. There has been a recorded increase in tensions, policing and anti migrant sentiment. Highly notable is also the increase in fake news and misinformation campaigns targeting migrant populations.*

At the start of the coronavirus crisis, the defence minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin, ordered the army to guard migrant camps, as there was a 24 hour quarantine enacted for the migrants residing in Serbia's camps for the duration of the crisis. This was done reportedly for the safety of the migrants and of the local population.<sup>9</sup>

In Serbia there are 17 migrant detention camps with 9000 inhabitants. Already in the beginning of April, approximately one month after the first coronavirus case was reported in Serbia on 6 March, the migrants in Serbia's camps have been in complete isolation for 3-4 weeks in various camps as a result of the governments coronavirus response. Up to that point, there have been no confirmed infections within the migrant population. The long term isolation has flared up tensions which caused an assault of a worker and a mass fight, after which 30 migrants were arrested.<sup>10</sup>

The migrants were reportedly concerned by the lack of information that they were receiving. The army and the police, who are in charge of the migrant centers, have quelled protests and uprisings that started in multiple migrant centres, but as Serbian migration officials explained, the centers are in need of psychological help and information in a language understandable to them.<sup>11</sup>

As the crisis progressed, there was an escalation of anti-migrant discourse in serbia. The migrants were presented as an infected population which represents a danger to the rest of the population and as such, the police were instructed to detain and bring to camps any migrants

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<sup>9</sup> N1. (2020). Svi migranti u Srbiji ostaju u celodnevnom karantinu dok ne prođe epidemija. *N1*. Available on: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a589762/Svi-migranti-u-Srbiji-ostaju-u-celodnevnom-karantinu-dok-ne-prodje-epidemija.html>

<sup>10</sup> Sputnik. (2020). Мигрантима у Србији попуштају живци, држава има спреман одговор. *Sputnik Serbia*. Available on: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/202004081122293458-migrantima-u-srbiji-popustaju-zivci-drzava-ima-spreman-odgovor-brana/>

<sup>11</sup> RTS. (2020). Повишене тензије у центрима за азил, мигранти се жале да немају информације о епидемији. *Radio-televizija Srbije*. Available on: <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/ci/story/124/drustvo/3916647/migranti-pandemija-koronavirus-incidenti.html>

that they might find. According to the explanations of the Serbian commissariat for refugees and migrants, the restrictions on migrant movement outside the camps was enacted as a precaution to prevent the spread of the virus, particularly among the vulnerable and exposed migrant population. The camps had to be expanded following the increase in the population. There are numerous reports of increased police violence and push backs happening. Meanwhile, the European asylum support office has stated that the migrant transit has lowered by more than half from the month of March.<sup>12</sup>

During the first two weeks of April, there have been around 20 people crossing the border from North Macedonia, less than a third compared to the same time in 2019. From the start of May, there were many reports that anti migrant sentiment is reaching new highs, resulting in the incident in the city of Obrenovac, where an individual drove his car into a migrant camp while live streaming to facebook and emotionally denouncing migrants residing in Serbia. The facebook group opposed to migrant integration has become one of the fastest growing facebook groups in Serbia.<sup>13</sup>

There has been widespread proliferation of fake news in general, and there are many conspiracy theories floated. As psychologists have said, the situation we find ourselves in is different from those involving a war where there is a tangible enemy. As in all major crises, people go into "fight or flight" dynamics, which has resulted in the people wanting to vent in some way, and this is fertile ground for spread of false information. In the aforementioned facebook group, now the largest in Serbia, there are many nameless authors posting pictures of migrants, illustrating the other, war and violence, often from migrant camps in the Middle East, Greece and Turkey. The proliferation of conspiracy theories and fake news been going on in the context of no Covid infections in migrant camps, still in the end of May.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the UNHCR has congratulated the government of Serbia on its successful handling of the Covid-19 spread in migrant centers, which recorded no infections. This congratulations was sent in concurrence with the restoration of free movement on 14 May.<sup>15</sup>

As we have already mentioned, the proliferation of fake news was expanding further in the month of May. There have been many misleading statements regarding migrant settlement in Serbia, differential and preferential treatment of the migrants by the Serbian government and the building of new migrant centers. The campaigns regularly use Photoshop and other similar assets to get their point across and target opposing political parties.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> RSE. (2020). Balkanska ruta i dalje 'igra života i smrti'. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. Available on: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/izbeglice-migranti-balkanska-ruta-koronavirus/30594672.html>

<sup>13</sup> „Насељавање миграната у Србији“ и корона вирус: Како епидемија утиче на ширење лажних вести и антимигрантских ставова. *BBC Srbija*. Available on: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/cyr/srbija-52524776>

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Ozon. (2020). UNHCR: Čestitka vlastima Srbije i izbeglicama. *OzonPress*. Available on: <https://www.ozonpress.net/drustvo/unhcr-cestitka-vlastima-srbije-i-izbeglicama/>

<sup>16</sup> BBC. (2020). Мигранти, избори, вакцине, корона вирус: Недељни преглед дезинформација, манипулација чињеницама и лажних вести у Србији и региону. *BBC Srbija*. Available on: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/cyr/balkan-52793900>

Serbia was not spared the Covid-19 crisis. They reacted early and took decisive action regarding the migrant population. This strategy could be interpreted as working, since the migrant camps haven't reported any Covid-19 infection, but that does not mean that fake news regarding it was not spread. The migrants were, according to some of these reports, characterized as disease carrying and used as pawns for political aspiration of some.

## 4 Bosnia and Herzegovina

MARTIN SELAN (*Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia*)

*Migracije po tako imenovani Zahodno Balkanski poti so bile med zdravstveno krizo deležne bistveno manj pozornosti. Bosna in Hercegovina, praktično na pragu Evropske Unije je ena od tranzitnih držav na omenjeni poti, ki jih je kriza najbolj prizadela. To poročilo obravnava medijsko poročanje o migracijah v Bosni in Hercegovini (BiH) v obdobju od 1. aprila do 31. maja 2020.*

*In the midst of a global health crisis little or no attention has been paid to migration through the Western Balkan route. Virtually on the doorstep of the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most affected transit countries on this route. This paper will focus on media reports concerning migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in the specific time period from the beginning of April, till the end of May 2020.*

The Coronavirus pandemic has unexpectedly curbed migration flows in the region. During this time international organisations and institutions in BiH are predicting an increase in illegal border crossings. Preventive measures introduced by most countries in order to stop the spread of Covid-19, mainly the closure of borders, have led to reduced mobility and increased dependence of migrants on host authorities. In any case, migration flows through BiH primarily from Serbia in the direction of Croatia, are bound to continue in the coming months.

While the European Border and Coast Guard Agency says it is still too early for precise analysis, the Ministry of Security of BiH (MSB) predicts the Balkan route may soon become more relevant again with the lifting of movement and border restrictions. Meanwhile, the MSB estimates the number of migrants in various camp sites in BiH approximately 6300, with additional 7500 placed in camps across the border, in Serbia. Furthermore, there are about 100,000 migrants registered in camps all over Greece. The MSB anticipates at least a part of them will travel the route through BiH, as stated in a letter sent to “Nezavisne” newspaper.<sup>1</sup>

Despite limited numbers of new arrivals in BiH, there are still significant numbers of stranded migrants throughout the country. In April there were more than 2,000 people staying at the Blažuj migration centre in Sarajevo Canton, where a recent incident has taken place involving a crowd of over a hundred people. The authorities attributed the conflict among migrants to cultural differences, recognising the latter as the root cause for the incident. After a series of violent conflicts among migrants staying at the centre, security was tightened in and around the camp by police force. Additionally, one of the biggest priorities of the Ministry of Interior

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<sup>1</sup> Šajinović, D. (2020, 8. april). Korona usporila migrante na putu ka Evropi. *Nezavisne novine*. Available through: <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/drustvo/Korona-usporila-migrante-na-putu-ka-Evropi/593191>

of the Sarajevo Canton is said to be removing migrants from the streets, however, after the incident the local police will work to secure the migrant centre in the future as well.<sup>2</sup>

With the existing reception centres being overcrowded, migrants often live on the streets or in abandoned buildings. In mid-April, there were approximately 7500 people registered in BiH according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). In Una-Sana Canton, the police estimated the number of migrants living in and around the city of Bihać and nearby towns to about 1500. Approximately one month before, the authorities introduced restrictions of movement for migrants and refugees, as part of an effort to stop coronavirus from spreading, and ordered them to stay in temporary reception centres. The local authorities in coordination with the IOM established a new reception centre near the small town of Lipa, with plans to move about 1000 migrants to this new location. According to the mayor of Bihać, this is where health and safety can be better monitored. Representatives of Serbs living in the area, claim that the positioning of the migrant center Lipa sends a clear message that they are not welcome in the Bosniak and Croat dominated entity of the Federation. They strongly opposed its construction in the first place, threatening to block all access roads to the centre, as soon as the pandemic ends.<sup>3</sup>

In a press statement on 22 April the Minister of Security in the Council of Ministers Fahrudin Radončić said that “BiH is not a parking space for Europe” as he put it. For that reason, he denied help to the Una-Sana Canton in relocating migrants into a new reception centre near the village of Lipa, because according to him irregular migrants should be urgently deported. In addition, he demanded for 9000 or 10000 economic migrants to be listed as such so that ways for their deportation to home countries could be explored. Some migrants are coming from wealthier states than BiH, as the Minister pointed out, and those need to be deported. He predicted there would soon be 30 to 50 thousand new unemployed persons in BiH which makes hosting 10 thousand people on the permanent basis virtually impossible. Migrants present a security problem and cannot be left waiting on the doorstep of Europe in BiH.<sup>4</sup>

As the authorities in the Una-Sana Canton appear to be unable to manage migration flows and human trafficking through the region efficiently, people are confused whether it is incompetence or malice, that they are facing, the “Oslobođenje” newspaper reports. Some critics blame the biggest Bosnian political party (Party of Democratic Action, SDA) for the migrant crisis that is fairly obvious throughout the country, particularly in the Una-Sana region, which is considered as a “migrant canton” due to five registered reception centres in the area. Originally, the Una-Sana Canton authorities planned to relocate migrants from two overcrowded camps, Bira and Miral, to the newly established Lipa centre. However this never

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<sup>2</sup> Mališević, J. (2020, 15. april). Ministar MUP-a KS-a obišao policajce u Blažuju: 2.000 migranata je prioritet. *Oslobođenje*. Available through: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/sarajevo/ministar-mup-a-ks-a-obisao-policajce-u-blazuju-2-000-migranata-je-prioritet-548842>

<sup>3</sup> Kovačević, D. (2020, 21. april). Bosnia Shifts Vulnerable Migrants and Refugees to New Temporary Camp. *Balkan Insight*. Available through: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/21/bosnia-shifts-vulnerable-migrants-and-refugees-to-new-temporary-camp/#gsc.tab=0>

<sup>4</sup> Radončić: Migrante deportovati, BiH nije parking za Evropu. (2020, 22. april). *Nezavisne novine*. Available through: <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Radoncic-Migrante-deportovati-BiH-nije-parking-za-Evropu/595700>

happened. Instead only a larger capacity was created for migrants, who apparently still take shelter in the town of Bihać as well. There are continuous reports of human smuggling throughout the country, with more and more people involved in what appears to be a lucrative business. Most recently a man from Sarajevo has been caught smuggling 22 migrants across BiH in his vehicle. Exactly how open the Balkan route really is, remains uncertain. Supposedly, one humanitarian aid worker told the press that one of her protégés, a Pakistani national sent a message in the first week of May, confirming his successful arrival in Italy.<sup>5</sup>

From 1 January to 9 May, the BiH Border Police deterred 2214 people from attempting to cross the border illegally. In a statement for the BiH Radio and Television, The Border Police spokesperson said they recently apprehended a group of five Afghanistan and seven Pakistan nationals in the area of Izačić, at the Croatia – BiH border, and sent them to the Bihać reception centre.<sup>6</sup>

At the meeting of the Operational Group for the Coordination of Activities and Supervision of Migrant Crisis in the Una-Sana Canton, its members demanded the closure of the temporary reception centre Bira in the center of Bihać. They appealed to various institutions, primarily UNICEF, to relocate unaccompanied minors from the Bira camp, and ensure them adequate living conditions at the new temporary location out of the Una-Sana Canton. Additionally, they called on the Bihać City administration to ensure uninterrupted water supply at the Lipa camp as soon as possible.<sup>7</sup>

As soon as the epidemiological situation improved, the number of new arrivals into BiH grew. Reportedly, most border crossings happen on the “Zvornik route”, where migrants cross the Drina river at the border with Serbia, and then travel to BiH, in the direction of the city of Tuzla. Illegal border crossings are expected to grow in the coming months as the water level in Drina drops, consequently making it easier to cross. Furthermore, a local inhabitant claims that the area around the city of Zvornik has not been fully de-mined yet, hence a tragedy could occur.<sup>8</sup>

Migration through BIH is progressively perceived as a security issue and an additional pressure on the already fragile stability of the country. There a growing uncertainty about the future flow of migration along with a growing concern regarding BiH becoming the so-called “pocket” for people trying to get into the European Union. internal issues and regional complexities intensify the impact of migration in BiH even more. Provision of basic needs to migrants is proving to be a colossal challenge for BiH, one that will persist or even worsen in time.

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<sup>5</sup> Bender, F. (2020, 8. may). Balkanska ruta otvorena i u pandemiji. *Oslobodjenje*. Available through: <https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/unsko-sanski-kanton/balkanska-ruta-otvorena-i-u-pandemiji-555123>

<sup>6</sup> Izačić: Spriječen ilegalni ulazak migranata u BiH. (2020, 11. may). *Radiotelevizija Bosne i Hercegovine*. <https://bhrt.ba/1148142/izacic-sprijecen-ilegalni-ulazak-migranata-u-bih/>

<sup>7</sup> Operativna grupa USK insistira na što skorijem zatvaranju centra Bira. (2020, 18. may). *Vijesti.ba*. Available through: <https://vijesti.ba/clanak/492828/operativna-grupa-usk-insistira-na-sto-skorijem-zatvaranju-centra-bira>

<sup>8</sup> Skokić, E. (2020, 24. may). Tuzla ponovo na udaru ilegalnih migranata. *Dnevni avaz*. Available through: <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/bih/572060/tuzla-ponovo-na-udaru-ilegalnih-migranata>

## 5 Croatia

IGOR ZIDARIČ (*Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia*)

*Hrvaška se je na začetku predsedovanja Svetu EU soočila z dvema zelo različnima a hkrati povezanimi težavama: ilegalne migracije in epidemija Covid-19. Po izbruhu pandemije je velik del javnosti pričakoval, da bo posledično izbruhnil nov migrantski val skozi Hrvaško zaradi preobremenjenosti države z novo epidemijo. Toda restriktivne mere držav Zahodnega Balkana v marcu in aprilu so skoraj prepolovile število ilegalnih prehodov hrvaške meje v primerjavi s preteklimi meseci. Rahljanje ukrepov po državah pa je v sredini maja znova povečalo pritisk ilegalnih migrantov na Hrvaško. Predvideva se, da bo v prihodnjih mesecih povečana prisotnost Covid-19 v Afriki in Aziji še dodatno sprožila novi val migracij po t. i. Balkanski migracijski poti. Dodaten izziv pa bodo predstavljali tihotapci ljudi in organizirane kriminalne združbe, ki so na delu že od same vzpostavitve Balkanske migracijske poti iz leta 2015.*

*At the beginning of its presidency of the Council of the EU, Croatia faced two very different but related problems: illegal migration and the Covid-19 epidemic. After the outbreak of the pandemic, a large part of the public expected that a new wave of migrants would break through Croatia due to the preoccupation of the country with a new epidemic. However, the restrictive measures of the Western Balkan countries in March and April almost halved the number of illegal crossings of the Croatian border compared to previous months. The easing of measures by the countries in mid-May again increased the pressure of illegal migrants on Croatian border. The increased presence of Covid-19 in Africa and Asia is projected to further trigger a new wave of migration on the so-called Balkan migration route. Moreover, human smugglers and organized criminal groups, who have been at work since the establishment of the 2015 Balkan Migration Route still remain a threat.*

Migrations through the Western Balkans have been going on intensively since 2015 when the so-called Balkan refugee route established itself. Since then, the number of migrants flowing through the region has depended on the cooperation between the EU and Turkey. The 3 billion €aid agreement has largely curbed migration by scattering it across countries that have become migrant pockets. However, in early March, Turkey abolished this deal and opened its borders for immigrants who wanted to migrate to the EU. The number of illegal border crossings increased at the very beginning of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU. At the beginning of March 2020, the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visited the Greek-Turkish border along with presidents of the European Commission, European Parliament and Council of the EU. Unlike in 2015, this time



the entire EU leadership was determined to secure the EU's external borders and assistance to Greece.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after these events, an outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic followed, largely overshadowing media coverage of illegal migrations through Croatia. This paper analyzes the Croatian mainstream media coverage on migration in April and May 2020 during the peak of the Covid-19 epidemic in the country.

It is interesting to note that the public television HRT reported very modestly on illegal migration in April and May. In early April, HRT presented the migration situation in Greece and Bosnia and Herzegovina at the peak of the Covid-19 crisis. At that point Greece had about 100,000 migrants on its territory and enforced quarantine on its refugee camps. BiH followed the Greek example and ordered the isolation of 715 migrants in the country in early April.<sup>10</sup> This was shortly followed by The Council of Ministers of BiH to ban the movement of all illegal migrants in the country, explaining the measure was needed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus epidemic.<sup>11</sup>

The trend of quarantine enforcement in the refugee camps throughout the Balkans signaled that the outbreak of pandemic might slow down the illegal migrations in Croatia to some extent. However, there were some concerns in the Croatian media space that the migration flow will renew itself when Covid-19 reaches Africa and the Middle East. "Večernji" backed these speculations and published that the migration flow has decreased by half compared to previous months. However, European Asylum Office Support warned that the spread of Covid-19 in the Middle East might increase the migration flow to Europe.<sup>12</sup> However, migrants' pressure on the country's eastern border has increased again following the easing of measures introduced by BiH earlier to prevent the spread of coronavirus.<sup>13</sup> If we take into account that the majority of migrants entered Croatia from BiH, it is interesting to point out that the influx of migrants from Serbia also increased in May. Due to the escalation of incidents in the Serbian town of Sid on the border with Croatia, Serbian President Aleksander Vucic even ordered the use of the army to protect the local population as soon as possible.<sup>14</sup> Such events in BiH and Serbia have proved, that immigration pressure on Croatia was building up once again.

As a result, in mid-May, most of the Croatian main media outlets reported that new illegal immigrant pressure is already visible. At the end of May, the Croatian police were already preparing for new migrant pressure. The main problem is that most migrant camps in

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<sup>9</sup> Ekipa HRT-a na grčkom prijelazu s najvećim migrantskim pritiskom. (2020, 30. april). *HRT*. Dostopno prek <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/587408/plenkovic-i-celnici-eu-a-obilaze-grcko-tursku-granicu>

<sup>10</sup> Hina, M. Š. (2020, 5. april). U karanteni i drugi migrantski kamp u Grčkoj. *HRT*. Dostopno prek <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/600250/u-karanteni-i-drugi-migrantski-kamp-u-grckoj>

<sup>11</sup> Vijeće ministara BiH uvelo zabranu kretanja ilegalnim migrantima. (2020, 16. april). *HRT*. Dostopno prek <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/604920/vijece-ministara-bih-uvulo-zabranu-kretanja-ilegalnim-migrantima>

<sup>12</sup> Romac, D. (2020, 13. maj). Vijeće ministara BiH uvelo zabranu kretanja ilegalnim migrantima. *Večernji*. Dostopno prek <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/broj-migranata-prepolovljen-ali-zbog-epidemije-bi-mogao-opet-rasti-1401712>

<sup>13</sup> Ublažavanjem restriktivskih mjera u BiH porastao broj ilegalnih migranata. (2020, 18. maj). *Večernji*. Dostopno prek <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/ublazavanjem-restriktivskih-mjera-u-bih-porastao-broj-ilegalnih-migranata-1403341>

<sup>14</sup> Vučić naredio hitnu uporabu vojske u Šidu: 'Radi zaštite stanovništva od migranata. (2020, 16. maj). *Večernji*. Dostopno prek <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/vucic-naredio-hitnu-uporabu-vojske-u-sidu-radi-zastite-stanovnistva-od-migranata-1402748>

neighbouring countries are located just behind the Croatian border. Thus, migrants do not need much effort to try to cross the border illegally again. They mostly try this under the cover of night.<sup>15</sup> Other than that, during April and May Croatian main media outlets constantly reported on human trafficking and criminal groups who transported immigrants through Croatia. On 19 May, "Večernji" published that the Croatian police broke up a well-organized group of migrant smugglers who were transporting migrants from BiH to the EU through the Croatian border.<sup>16</sup>

In the first four months of 2020, illegal migration through Croatia decreased by a quarter compared to the previous year. But already in May, it turned out that the release of anti-Covid19 restrictions triggered a new wave of illegal migration through Croatia. The spread of Covid-19 to Africa and Asia, according to the European Asylum Office Support, will further increase migrant pressure on the Croatian border and the borders of the Western Balkan countries.

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<sup>15</sup> Haidar, H. D. (2020, 23. maj). Kreće novi migrantski val: Policija zabrinuta zbog snimaka premlaćivanja. *Večernji*. Dostupno prek <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/video-krece-novi-migrantski-val-hrvatska-policija-zabrinuta-zbog-snimaka-premlacivanja-u-bih-1404504>

<sup>16</sup> Razbijen dobro organizirani lanac krijumčara: Prebacivali su migrante iz BiH u Hrvatsku. (2020, 19. maj). *Večernji*. Dostupno prek <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-zagrebu-otkriveno-zlocinacko-udruzenje-ilegalno-prebacivali-migrante-iz-bih-u-hrvatsku-1403569>

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