Europe's Leaky Outer Frontier

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European institutions to start spending serious money to defend Serbia's borders, seen as a bridgehead for illegal immigrants.

At nightfall near the town of Zajecar, on Serbia’s border with Bulgaria, lines of cars wait obediently for the border police to check their documents as they cross from one state to another.

Most of the Serbs heading east are going shopping or on holiday on Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast. For most of the Bulgarians, Serbia is just a transit country on the way to the West.

These travellers look innocent enough, and indeed they are, because even though this frontier zone is regarded as a major security headache by the European Union, EU, the problems are not going on here, but up in the thickly wooded hills around Zajecar.

Night after night, people-smugglers and asylum-seekers trek westwards under cover of darkness, using the porous and poorly guarded frontier as a gateway from Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey and elsewhere to the dream lands of the west.

They choose this stretch because unlike much of Serbia’s border with Romania further to the north, there is no broad river to separate the two states, just forest-covered hills criss-crossed by secret pathways.

For years, this covert traffic has been escalating unchecked. But change may now be at hand. With the accession of Hungary to the EU, Serbia has become, in the words of one international expert working in Serbia, “the outer border of the European Union”. Change is finally afoot.

STEMMING THE TRADE IN PEOPLE

In September, Serbia’s interior ministry and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, are due to sign a key agreement aimed in part at blocking the people-smugglers. A “memorandum of understanding” covering reform of Serbia’s police force and bringing it closer to European standards includes a crucial section devoted to strengthening the border policing to prevent illegal trafficking in goods and people.

The OSCE will provide a package known as Integrated Border Police System Management to help Serbia improve its border policing, demilitarise the border which is still patrolled by the army, and modernise frontier crossing points.

The signing of this document is only one in a series of steps that the EU and the rest of the international community are taking to enhance the capacity of police and other border control agencies to patrol this sensitive frontier more effectively.

The growing interest in Serbia’s borders forms part of a wider context, with crises in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last two years only adding to the already substantial flow of illegal immigrants into the EU.
The migrants and the people who smuggle them have homed in on the Balkan peninsula, including Serbia, as a prime transit route now that it lies directly on the EU’s perimeter.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

The most critical areas of Serbia as regards the smuggling of migrants and asylum-seekers are in the south, the entry point for people coming from the Middle East and east Asia: the south-eastern border with Bulgaria and the administrative border with Kosovo.

A separate route in trafficked women, mainly from Moldova and other parts of the former Soviet Union, runs through Romania and affects a different part of the Serbian border, in north-eastern Vojvodina.

In the first six months of this year, the Serbian police caught 409 persons who had entered Serbia illegally. Ninety were Turkish citizens, most of them Kurds; 70 were Afghans, 51 were Moldovans and 32 were Chinese. The rest were from a host of different countries.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg. The police admit they catch only a small fraction of the total who make their way across the secret trails. The true numbers may run into thousands annually.

People smugglers and human traffickers are not the same thing. The former take cash from clients to help them gain illegal entry into countries, while trafficking involves coercion or deception and often results in forced labour or prostitution.

Lieutenant-Colonel Predrag Zlatic, chief of the Section for Foreigners at the Serbian interior ministry’s Border Affairs Department, told IWPR that Serbia was a key part of the smugglers’ route because of its location between Africa and Asia and destinations in western Europe.

Zlatic added that in 2003, most illegal entries into Serbia were recorded on or near the Bulgarian border, most of them of Asian origin.

“If one channel is closed, another one opens up,” said Zlatic. “If we shut down a channel from Bulgaria, another one appears in Romania, and vice versa. This year we have disrupted many smuggling channels, not only in regions close to the border like Zajecar, but also deep inside Serbia, such as around Belgrade.”

Serbia’s 2,155 kilometre frontier is guarded by the Army of Serbia-Montenegro and the Serbian police, except for the 264 km stretch which separates Kosovo – still technically part of Serbia but controlled by the United Nations administration UNMIK – from Albania and Macedonia. The army guards the border itself while the police patrol the wider frontier zone.

Experts cite many problems facing border control in Serbia, including outdated technology and low staffing levels.

For a start, the idea that the army should guard state borders is seen as anachronistic and incompatible with modern European standards. It is a hold-over from previous regimes which viewed neighbouring countries as potential threats.
“The army is inefficient and static in securing the country’s borders. It is not capable of responding to the challenges that Serbia and Europe in general are facing,” an international expert on border security told IWPR. “This is why it should be replaced by professional border police forces.”

This expert – who asked not to be named - warned that creating such a force would be both complex and expensive, and would require reorganisation, re-training, new equipment, and better intelligence work to monitor trafficking.

The lion’s share of the task of securing the border, particularly when it comes to stopping illegal immigrants, is carried out by the interior ministry’s Border Police Department.

But on a visit to Zajecar, IWPR had ample opportunity to see how insufficiently staffed and short of equipment this unit is for the task it confronts.

Only yards away from the large crowds and commotion at the Vrska Cuka border crossing, the green flat lowlands rise into wooded hills – impenetrable to the prying eyes of the police on either side.

“This border area features very difficult terrain, but the criminal groups organising human smuggling have experienced guides who know the region very well,” Boris Vojvodic, chief inspector of the border police in Zajecar, told IWPR.

Vojvodic noted that many of the illegal immigrants from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan the police caught had been previously granted refugee status in Bulgaria, enabling them to use this country as a springboard into the EU zone.

Most attempt to enter Serbia via the 109 km-long stretch controlled by the Zajecar police and the Serbian-Montenegrin military.

Zeljko Pogarcic, head of the border policing department in Zajecar, described how they go about it, “Groups of illegal immigrants get into vans which are driven to a spot near the Bulgarian-Serbian border. There, Bulgarian criminals hand these people over to their Serbian counterparts.”

Pogarcic pointed to a road running parallel to the main highway near Zajecar. This road is so overgrown with trees that it is almost invisible, and serves as an ideal hideout for criminals awaiting cargoes of illegal immigrants. After they have been guided across the border, the gangs on the Serbian side drive them away in trucks or vans.

Zajecar police officers told IWPR that the smugglers also try to get their clients through the border checkpoint by hiding them in truck containers with false bottoms or under tarpaulin covers, in the upper section of double-decker buses, and so on.

Often, however, these migrants end up stranded before reaching their destination. Sometimes the smugglers dump them at toll gates on the E75 motorway in Serbia, telling them they have reached the border with Hungary.

Local truck and bus drivers keen on earning cash on the side, and villagers who know the terrain and can serve as guides, are all involved in this lucrative trade, the police said.
The large sums of money that can be made mean criminal groups can afford state-of-the-art communications and vehicles. Pogarcic admitted there were also cases where corrupt soldiers and police were paid to turn a blind eye.

In his view, the pursuit of immigrants and the criminals who smuggle them is a never-ending game of cat-and-mouse. The police set up ambushes in different places, change the routes taken by border patrols and set up checkpoints deep inside Serbian territory, but the smugglers are often one step ahead.

Lack of sophisticated monitoring equipment and shortage of staff it leaves Serbian border units struggling to gather information about the activities and plans of the criminal networks.

CHINESE TARGETING SERBIAN BORDERS

Serbian police and international experts told IWPR that the southern border was becoming an increasingly important transit point for Chinese nationals attempting to reach the EU.

“The Chinese are here again. They are good at smuggling people and Chinese immigrants tend to rely on their compatriots,” an international source told IWPR. “Take a look at the map and you will see that the Chinese in Serbia are concentrated in towns along the smuggling route, which runs from Pristina to Novi Pazar, Belgrade, Sarajevo…”

Predrag Zlatic of the Serbian interior ministry agreed, saying the international administration in Kosovo had made the problem worse by abolishing visa requirements for foreigners entering the UNMIK-administered territory. This, he said, has encouraged Chinese, Kurds and others to use Kosovo as a first staging post en route to Serbia and then to western Europe.

The influx of Chinese citizens entering the EU via Serbia caused headaches in Brussels in the years when Slobodan Milosevic was in power. Thanks to the warm ties between Belgrade and Beijing, Chinese nationals were allowed to enter Serbia freely and obtain residence permits, and many moved on to the EU.

At the time, in the mid- to late Nineties, some local and foreign media reports claimed that up to 60,000 Chinese people had been granted residence permits in Serbia. This figure is exaggerated: most experts put the real figure closer to 10,000.

To stem the flow, the new government which ousted Milosevic in 2000 introduced a strict visa regime which slashed the numbers of Chinese arriving in Serbia.

But police say there has been a fresh influx over the past two years, and Chinese nationals are now assisted by compatriots already settled in the country.

BRUSSELS OUTLINES RESCUE PLANS

European assistance will be directed towards reforming and modernising the Serbian border police, preparing it to take over the tasks carried out by the army, and modernising border crossings.
Several institutions such as the OSCE, the European Agency for Reconstruction, EAR, the British government’s foreign aid agency DFID and other national and international organisations are involved. Assistance to Serbia is also coming through the EU programme for the western Balkan countries, called CARDS - Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation - in two significant areas of cooperation, namely justice and home affairs and administrative capacity building.

A particularly important role in the reform and modernisation of the border police is played by the OSCE, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as this body is tasked with coordinating the activities of all the other international organisations involved in the process.

Alessandra Manuguerra, Border Policing Programme manager with the OSCE in Serbia-Montenegro, told IWPR that the principal task was to help police take over control from the army, as well as assist in vital areas such as the provision of technology and training.

The sums involved are not small – and that alone is a measure of Europe’s concern. In 2003 alone, EAR set aside 12 million euro as support for law enforcement agencies in Serbia. The bulk of this money, around seven million euro, was earmarked for the border police.

Assistance includes procurement of all-terrain vehicles, and systems to monitor movements on waterways, reducing the need for river patrol boats. Of particular importance is the installation of thermal imaging cameras to allow police to check for people concealed inside freight trucks, especially those carrying TIR plates. The TIR system entitles the drivers of sealed container lorries to pass swiftly through transit countries, without local customs opening the freight for inspection.

In addition to modernising the police, the EU is investing in the Integrated Border Management Programme which will make the passage of people and goods through Serbia more efficient and at the same time more rigorously controlled. In 2004, the EAR designated six million euro for this programme in Serbia.

Along the most important international traffic artery through Serbia, known as Corridor No 10, running from Hungary to Macedonia, funds provided by the European Commission have been already used to renovate and update facilities at Horgos – an important border crossing with the EU’s newest member, Hungary. The crossing at Batrovic to Croatia has also been updated.

EAR is now planning to modernise the Presevo crossing in southern Serbia, which leads to Macedonia and on to Greece. This crossing is currently a bottleneck for international traffic travelling along Corridor No 10. The upgraded crossing in Presevo will have increased overall capacity and better facilities for police and customs inspections.

In addition to international assistance, Belgrade has taken its own steps towards European standards.

To crack down on human trafficking and smuggling, Serbia has established closer cooperation with the international police network Interpol. It has also taken part in major regional joint police actions against trafficking. One of these - Operation Mirage in 2003 – brought together police from Serbia-Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, Romania and Slovenia, who conducted thousands of raids across the region, netting several hundred suspected traffickers.

In addition to intensifying its efforts in the field, Serbia has also introduced visa regimes for nationals from states identified as the prime sources of illegal migrants, such as Moldova.
In the meantime, business as usual

Predrag Zlatic of the Serbian police makes the point that given Serbia’s continuing economic crisis, its border forces will have to continue relying on obsolete methods until European aid trickles down to places like Zajecar.

“We need new equipment for border crossings and good professionals to do the work,” said Zlatic. “We need computer equipment and heat-sensitive detectors.”

The cost of a single thermal vision camera, an essential tool for detecting people hidden in vehicles and standard issue in most Western police forces, can cost tens of thousands of US dollars – way beyond the budget of the cash-strapped Serbian police.

Security analysts agree that no efficient border control system can be created in Serbia without strong support from the international community. The signals coming from the EU and the international community suggest that this help will now be forthcoming.

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Location: Africa
          Middle East

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