

Montenegrin Immigrant Trade

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Montenegrin criminals are profiting from the growing trade in illegal immigrants

Two Yugoslav Army, VJ, officers serving in Montenegro were recently arrested after police discovered 25 illegal Chinese immigrants in their vehicle.

The officers admitted charging the immigrants 500 German marks each to transport them from Podgorica to Jaz, a beach close to Budva, from where they hoped to be smuggled across the Adriatic to southern Italy.

The incident caused political ructions here, as the VJ has lately been accusing policemen loyal to Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic of trafficking and other criminal activities.

But in truth, the episode said a lot more about the growing trade in illegal immigrants between Montenegro and Italy. Italian police each week arrest around a thousand migrants along a 70 km stretch of coastline near Pugila alone.

At the beginning of August, a group of sailors suspected of ferrying migrants across the Adriatic were arrested. Their detention followed reports that two Chinese girls drowned after being thrown overboard by Montenegrin smugglers.

The growth in the trade comes a year after one hundred Roma died when a boat taking them from Montenegro to Western Europe sank.

Shortly after, a ferry sailing between Bar and Bari stumbled on a sinking ship with 69 migrants - including 30 children. All were rescued.

Little is known about the trade in humans. The organisers are rarely brought to justice because of government corruption. The public often only hear about the scandalous business when migrants drown en route to Italy.

The smuggling of immigrants in this part of the world is thought to have been started by cigarette smugglers four years ago. It began to flourish with the exodus of Albanians and Roma refugees from Kosovo - many of desperate to get to Western Europe.

The racket has since been bolstered by Serbia's growing ties with Beijing and Sarajevo's improving relations with Tehran. Twice a day Yugoslav planes land in Belgrade full of Chinese passengers determined to reach the West. Iranian migrants, meanwhile, fly to Bosnia, where they are not required to register with the police if they do not stay more than 90 days - ample time to find someone to ferry them to Italy.

The immigrants are transported to centres close to the Montenegrin coast. They are then transferred by van at night along old, almost forgotten roads to remote bays and inlets, from where they are ferried across the Adriatic.

Small groups are transported in powerful speedboats, also used to smuggle cigarettes. Larger groups are brought over in ships. The sea route costs the migrants between 2,000 and 3,000 marks.

When the smugglers employ ships to ferry the migrants, they abandon them when they are close to Italy, returning home in speedboats. They leave the passengers to steer the vessels towards the shore where they are intercepted by coastguards. When things go wrong, bodies of migrants inevitably wash up on Adriatic beaches.

Zoran Radulovic is a regular IWPR contributor.

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