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TRANSNATIONAL CRIME INNOVATION: HOW HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS ADAPT TO MIGRATION POLICIES – THE NORTH MACEDONIAN RESPONSE DURING THE EVERLASTING EUROPEAN MIGRANT CRISIS

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Abstract

This article examines how transnational organised criminal networks involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling have adapted to changing migration policies and border control regimes along the Western Balkan route, with a focus on North Macedonia as a key transit country. Using criminological theory, legal analysis, and longitudinal data, the study covers the period from the 2015 migrant crisis to 2024. The findings show that criminal groups have evolved into flexible, network-based structures marked by route diversification, technological innovation, and polycriminal activity. Restrictive migration policies and border closures have not reduced irregular migration but have reshaped criminal opportunity structures, increasing reliance on smuggling services and blurring the line between smuggling and trafficking. Persistent institutional difficulties in identifying trafficking within mixed migration flows continue to undermine victim protection. The article concludes that effective responses require stronger victim-centred identification practices alongside border control and enforcement measures.

Key words: Human Trafficking, Migrant Smuggling, Transnational Crime, North Macedonia, Criminal organisation.

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ИНОВАЦИЈЕ У ТРАНСНАЦИОНАЛНОМ КРИМИНАЛУ: КАКО СЕ МРЕЖЕ ЗА ТРГОВИНУ ЉУДИМА ПРИЛАГОЂАВАЈУ МИГРАЦИОНИМ ПОЛИТИКАМА – ОДГОВОР СЕВЕРНЕ МАКЕДОНИЈЕ ТОКОМ ДУГОТРАЈНЕ ЕВРОПСКЕ МИГРАНТСКЕ КРИЗЕ

Апстракт

Овај рад анализира начине на које су транснационалне организоване криминалне мреже укључене у кријумчарење миграната и трговину људима прилагодиле своје деловање променама миграционих политика и режима контроле граница дуж Западнобалканске руте, са посебним фокусом на Северну Македонију као транзитну земљу. На основу криминолошке теорије, правне анализе и лонгитудиналних података, истраживање обухвата период од мигрантске кризе 2015. године до 2024. године. Резултати показују да су криминалне групе еволуирале у флексибилне, мрежно организоване структуре, обележене диверзификацијом рута, технолошким иновацијама и поликриминалним деловањем. Рестриктивне миграционе политике нису смањиле нерегуларне миграције, већ су повећале зависност миграната од кријумчарских мрежа и додатно замаглиле границу између кријумчарења и трговине људима. Стални проблеми у идентификацији жртава указују на потребу за снажнијим, жртвама усмереним приступима у оквиру миграционог управљања и борбе против трговине људима.

Кључне речи: Трговина људима, кријумчарење миграната, транснационални криминал, Северна Македонија, криминалне организације.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, organised crime in the Western Balkans has undergone significant transformation, driven by regional instability, transnational migration flows, and evolving European migration control policies. Within this context, North Macedonia has emerged as a key transit country along the Balkan route, placing it at the intersection of irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. Since the escalation of the European migrant crisis in 2015, organised criminal groups operating in and through the country have demonstrated marked adaptability, exploiting legal, institutional, and humanitarian gaps to maximise profit while minimising risk.

The prolonged migrant crisis has intensified cross-border criminal activity and exposed persistent weaknesses in national responses. Smuggling networks have increasingly overlapped with, and in some cases evolved into, trafficking structures, blurring legal distinctions between facilitation and exploitation. Migrants transiting through North Macedonia have been exposed to violence, extortion, unsafe transport, and exploitation, resulting in serious human rights violations. At the same time, reception and detention facilities, most notably the Reception Centre for Foreigners "Gazi Baba," revealed systemic shortcomings, including overcrowding, inadequate conditions, and insufficient safeguards for vulnerable groups.

A central challenge in the North Macedonian context remains the consistent failure to identify victims of human trafficking within mixed migration flows. Smuggled migrants are commonly treated as irregular migrants rather than potential victims, leading to the denial of protection and assistance and allowing criminal networks to operate with relative impunity. Although a legal framework for victim identification and protection exists, its practical application has remained limited and inconsistent. This article examines the evolution of organised crime in North Macedonia through the lens of migrant smuggling and human trafficking, focusing on criminal adaptation, institutional responses, and implications for human rights and criminal justice policy in transit states along the Balkan route.

ORGANISED CRIME AS AN ADAPTIVE AND HYBRIDISED SYSTEM

Organised criminal networks represent one of the most significant and evolving security threats in the European Union and the Western Balkan region. Contemporary organised crime is increasingly characterised by high adaptability, transnational reach, and polycriminal activity, allowing criminal groups to operate across multiple illicit markets while generating substantial social and economic harm. These networks do not function as static entities; rather, they continuously adjust their structures and methods in response to geopolitical shifts, migration governance, enforcement strategies, and broader political and economic transformations. In the Western Balkans, and particularly in transit states, organised crime increasingly exhibits features of so-called *hybrid threats*, where criminal activities intersect with governance weaknesses, corruption risks, and institutional transitions linked to European Union accession processes harm (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025). A central driver of this adaptability is the growing digitalisation of organised crime. Criminal groups no longer operate solely through traditional, hierarchical structures but increasingly combine physical and virtual infrastructures, relying on network-based cooperation among loosely connected actors performing complementary roles (Garcia, 2025; Maksimova, 2021) .Organised criminal networks increasingly resemble legal business models, pursuing stable and pre-planned profits through flexible operational arrangements (Kuchalskis, 2017 - 2018)). Their resilience is reinforced by limited network visibility, decentralised decision-making, and the ability to rapidly mobilise partners across jurisdictions, often based on partial and localised information (Van Elteren, Vasconcelos, & Lees, 2024). As a result, law enforcement interventions tend to disrupt individual nodes rather than dismantle entire networks, allowing criminal activity to persist and reorganise (Europol, 2025).

In transit countries, changes in migration governance, border management, and enforcement intensity create fluctuating opportunity structures for migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Organised criminal groups respond by redirecting routes, modifying logistics, and exploiting regulatory and institutional gaps, effectively transforming restrictive migration policies into criminal opportunities (Europol; Interpol, 2016). Within this context, the distinction between migrant smuggling and human trafficking becomes increasingly blurred. These crimes share similar etiological factors, transnational organisation, and operational concealment, while victims' fear, dependency, and non-cooperation further complicate identification (Kosevaliska, Maksimova, & Nikodinovska, 2022, pp. 215-216). Normative asymmetries in international and national legal frameworks exacerbate this problem. Smuggled migrants, even when exposed to violence, coercion, or degrading treatment, are generally not recognised as victims and are often sanctioned for migration-related offences, without access to protection or remedies (Lažetić & Zdravkova, 2020). By contrast, victims of human trafficking are entitled to comprehensive assistance and legal protection. In practice, however, enforcement priorities focused on detecting facilitation offences mean that many trafficked persons remain unidentified within mixed migration flows, leaving them unprotected and reinforcing the invisibility of exploitation (Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, OSCE, 2017). This transit-state dilemma illustrates how adaptive organised crime exploits both technological innovation and legal-institutional gaps, underscoring the need for responses that address organised crime not only as a security issue, but as a dynamic system shaped by governance choices and normative frameworks.

The Smuggling-trafficking Nexus in North Macedonia

In practice, the boundaries between migrant smuggling and human trafficking are frequently blurred, largely because both phenomena are shaped by the same political and socio-economic drivers (Maksimova, Kosevaliska, & Nanev, 2020, p. 255). This overlap is particularly evident in the North Macedonian 2015 migrant crisis context. Practitioners working directly with migrants on the territory have reported numerous suspicious situations indicative of potential human trafficking among migrant populations (Florin & Healy, 2018). However, in many cases these indicators remain undetected or unaddressed. This is partly because affected individuals often leave the country shortly after identification, while frontline authorities tend to prioritise formal registration procedures and the facilitation of transit rather than engaging with migrants' personal experiences and trajectories. In addition, limited training and insufficient capacity to rapidly recognise trafficking indicators further contribute to the under-identification of exploitation and victimization. This section below examines the smuggling-trafficking nexus through international legal standards and the North Macedonian institutional response

Due to the adaptability of the criminal organisation, smuggled migrants may become vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking through multiple interconnected pathways that reflect the adaptive strategies of criminal networks (Bozinovska Siljanovska & Cvetanovska, 2022, p. 7). Migrants may be subjected to exploitation in destination countries as a means of repaying debts incurred for their journey, thereby transforming smuggling arrangements into situations of coercion and dependency. Technology can also be abused for this extortion purposes. Migrants are being kidnapped and abused instead of being transported to their intended destinations, and recordings of the abuse were sent to the migrants' families via digital apps, accompanied by threats and ransom demands (Milešević Plavšić, Delić, Grujičić, Ćurko, & Najdanović, 2025). In transit contexts, smuggling operations may evolve into trafficking schemes, with smugglers assuming the role of traffickers and subjecting migrants to sexual exploitation, forced labour, or involvement in illicit activities such as drug trafficking. Furthermore, migrants who lack sufficient financial resources to cover travel costs are particularly exposed to coercive arrangements in which exploitation becomes a means of settling debts (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012). These dynamics illustrate how organised criminal networks exploit structural vulnerabilities and financial dependency, reinforcing the convergence between smuggling and trafficking and highlighting the adaptive capacity of criminal organizations to shift between criminal markets and forms of exploitation.

Palermo-based Legal Distinction (International Standards)

Under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (United Nations , 2000), trafficking is defined by the concurrence of three elements: an act (such as recruitment, transport, or harbouring), the use of coercive or deceptive means, and an exploitative purpose. Exploitation includes, at a minimum, sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or similar practices, servitude, or organ removal. Consent is legally irrelevant where prohibited means are used, and in the case of children, the use of such means is not required. Human trafficking is thus a crime against the person and constitutes a serious human rights violation, entitling victims to protection and assistance under international law.

By contrast, the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants (United Nations, 2000) defines smuggling as the facilitation of irregular entry into a state for financial or material gain. Unlike trafficking, smuggling does not require coercion or exploitation as an inherent element and primarily infringes upon state sovereignty and migration control systems. Smuggled migrants are therefore not automatically recognised as victims, although they may be subjected to abuse or other crimes during the smuggling process. Notably, trafficking does not require cross-border movement and may occur entirely within a single state.

Domestic Response: Institutional and Legal Reforms

During the migration crisis in North Macedonia, many potential victims of human trafficking remained unidentified due to insufficient training of police officers in recognising trafficking indicators, particularly at the border (Zdravkova, Nofitoska, & Smilevska, 2023, p. 15). Victims' reluctance to cooperate with authorities—driven by fear, prior abuse, and dependency on traffickers—further impeded the disclosure of exploitation indicators, complicating detection and prosecution (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025, p. 60). The escalation of mixed migration flows exposed significant legal and operational challenges, as trafficking cases often originate within smuggling processes and are frequently misclassified, undermining victim protection and blurring distinctions between the two crimes (Bozinovska Siljanovska & Cvetanovska, 2022, p. 7)

In response, national authorities strengthened the institutional framework through successive National Strategies for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration (2017–2020[1]; 2021–2025[2]) and expanded victim identification mechanisms. Standard Operating Procedures adopted in 2010[3] were supplemented[4] with additional instruments addressing unaccompanied children and vulnerable migrants[5], incorporating refined trafficking indicators for mixed migration contexts (National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration, 2016). These reforms coincided with heightened reliance on smuggling networks during restrictive border regimes, illustrating both the scale of organised facilitation and the adaptability of criminal networks.

Further institutional coordination was achieved through the establishment of a National Unit for Suppression of Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking in 2018, enhancing cooperation between police and prosecutors (Association for the Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of

[1] http://nacionalnakomisija.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/IOM_Nacionalna-strategija_WEB.pdf
[2] http://nacionalnakomisija.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NACIONALNA-STRATEGIJA-MKD-ALB-ANG-25.10.2021.pdf
[3] http://nacionalnakomisija.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/SOP-za-postapuvanje-so-nepridruzuvani-deca-stranci.pdf
[4] http://nacionalnakomisija.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/SOP-za-postapuvanje-so-nepridruzuvani-deca-stranci.pdf
[5] http://nacionalnakomisija.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/SOP-za-postapuvanje-so-ranlivi-kategorii-lica-stranci.pdf

Women - ESE; Open Gate La Strada, 2023). Legislative developments, including the Law on Foreigners (Law on Foreigners , 2018), and the Law on Free Legal Aid (Law on Free Legal Aid, 2019)., strengthened procedural safeguards and access to justice for trafficking victims. Nevertheless, persistent gaps between formal norms and implementation highlight the ongoing need for coordinated, evidence-based, and victim-centred responses to the evolving smuggling–trafficking nexus along the Balkan route.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed qualitative–quantitative research design, drawing on the authors' long-term observation and systematic analysis of secondary sources to examine how human trafficking and migrant smuggling networks have adapted to changing migration policies in North Macedonia since 2015. It is based on official national and international data and documents, including statistics and reports from the State Statistical Office, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime and Corruption, the National Commission for Combating Human Trafficking and Illegal Migration, as well as UNODC, IOM, U.S. Trafficking in Persons Reports, EU institutions, and relevant non-governmental organisations.

The quantitative component applies descriptive and trend-based analysis of data on irregular migration, detected smuggling cases, and identified trafficking victims to examine developments over time in relation to key policy and governance changes. The qualitative component consists of a thematic review of academic literature, international and national legal frameworks, policy documents, and Standard Operating Procedures addressing trafficking, migrant smuggling, and victim protection. By integrating legal analysis with statistical trends and document-based interpretation, the study triangulates findings to assess criminal adaptation and institutional responses. While the analysis is limited by reliance on secondary data and potential underreporting, the use of multiple sources provides a robust and widely accepted methodological basis for examining transnational crime dynamics in the North Macedonian context.

ORGANISED CRIME AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA: A TRANSIT-STATE PERSPECTIVE

North Macedonia occupies a central position along the Western Balkan route and has consequently emerged as a key transit state for irregular migration and associated forms of organised crime. Organised criminal groups operating in the country predominantly function as polycriminal networks, simultaneously engaging in migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, and excise goods smuggling. Their operations rely heavily on transnational connections, particularly with criminal groups in Greece, which serves as both a major entry point for migrants and a logistical hub for falsified documents and onward movement. The infiltration of local businesses and informal economies provides logistical cover, enhances operational resilience, and allows criminal groups to rapidly adjust routes and methods in response to enforcement pressure (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025, p. 54).

Migration flows through North Macedonia are embedded within broader transcontinental routes linking Asia and Africa to the European Union. Prior to reaching the Balkan corridor, migrants commonly travel via the Eastern Mediterranean route through Turkey and Greece, the Central Mediterranean route via Libya and Italy, or the Western Mediterranean route toward Spain (Bozinovska Siljanovska & Cvetanovska, 2022, p. 3). Migrants transiting these routes are inherently vulnerable to multiple forms of victimisation. Restrictive and selective migration policies, procedural barriers, and inadequate treatment in both EU and transit Balkan states have contributed to increased exposure to violence, exploitation, and involvement in illicit activities, including smuggling and trafficking. These vulnerabilities were further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and by migrants' growing reliance on digital tools, which exposed them to additional risks such as fraud, cyber exploitation, and hate speech (Maksimova & Stanojoska, 2023). Europol estimates that over 90 per cent of migrants who arrived in Europe during the 2015 crisis relied on services provided by loosely structured criminal networks, underscoring the scale of organised facilitation along migration routes (OSCE, 2017, p. 15)

Operationally, migrant smuggling through North Macedonia is shaped by cost considerations and coordinated cross-border criminal organisation. While early migration flows relied heavily on the Central Mediterranean route, associated with high fees, smuggling networks increasingly redirected movement through Turkey, the Greek islands, and the Western Balkan route due to lower transportation costs and greater accessibility (Kekenovski, 2015). Smuggling from Greece into North Macedonia remains organised through coordinated transnational networks that plan timing, logistics, and onward transit, frequently using border areas such as Lojane and Vaksince as staging points. Payments are arranged through flexible mechanisms, including advance or deferred payments and rapid money transfer systems involving family members abroad, while adaptive practices such as unregistered vehicles and deliberate abandonment of migrants after partial payment reflect both exploitation and decentralised operational models (Racaj, Beqiri, & Saliu, 2023, p. 401).

Migrant smuggling typically unfolds through interconnected stages: facilitated irregular entry with the assistance of local guides familiar with terrain and surveillance patterns; temporary accommodation in concealed locations near the southern border, particularly in the Strumica -Gevgelija region; and organised transport toward the Macedonian -Serbian border for onward movement toward EU destinations (Zdravkova, Nofitoska, & Smilevska, 2023, p. 9). Policy shifts - including selective admission policies in late 2015, tightened border restrictions in early 2016, and the closure of the Western Balkan route in March 2016 - did not eliminate migration but instead redirected it into increasingly irregular channels, leaving many migrants, especially women and unaccompanied children, exposed to smuggling and trafficking risks (Kosevaliska, Maksimova, & Nikodinovska, 2022, pp. 224-225). Similar dynamics persisted during the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied by a rise in smuggling-related incidents and serious traffic accidents along Corridor 10 (Kosevaliska, Maksimova, & Nikodinovska, 2022, pp. 224-225).

In the post-crisis period (2021–2024), North Macedonia has continued to function as a key transit country despite intensified border controls. Cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) was strengthened through a joint operation launched in April 2023, resulting in increased patrols, document checks, and intelligence collection along the Macedonian–Greek border, with a continuous Frontex presence maintained throughout 2024 (Ivanova, 2024, p. 4). At the same time, changes in detention practices and criminal proceedings - such as the increased placement of migrants in the Reception Center for Foreigners rather than transit centres- reflect growing institutional capacity but have also raised concerns regarding the protection of fundamental rights, particularly for vulnerable groups (Stojchevski, 2022). Overall, the North Macedonian experience illustrates how both organised criminal networks and institutional responses have adapted in parallel to evolving migration governance, reinforcing the country's role as a critical node within transnational smuggling and trafficking systems (Stojchevski, 2021).

Innovation in Services and Concealment: Modus Operandi and Local Facilitators

In 2022, a new smuggling pattern was identified involving so-called 'VIP migrants,' who paid substantially higher fees in exchange for transportation arrangements designed to reduce the risk of detection when crossing the Greek–North Macedonian border. These cases illustrate the increasing stratification of smuggling services and the diversification of financial arrangements within organised smuggling networks. Intelligence assessments indicate that smugglers increasingly rely on payment systems such as M-CARD and M-TAG, vehicles registered to legal entities, and semi-trailer trucks equipped with improvised compartments used to conceal large numbers of migrants originating from Syria, Pakistan, India, Yemen, and other countries (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025, p. 53). Digital communication practices further enhance operational security, with smugglers using pseudonyms, self-deleting messages, and real-time location sharing. Closed communication groups frequently exchange Hawala payment codes and, increasingly, information on cryptocurrency payments, particularly Bitcoin and Tether, reflecting a gradual shift toward more sophisticated and less traceable financial instruments (Milešević Plavšić, Delić, Grujičić, Ćurko, & Najdanović, 2025).

More broadly, migrant smuggling in Europe remains a persistent and evolving form of transnational organised crime characterised by flexible, decentralised, and technology-enabled operational models. Smuggling networks make extensive use of encrypted communication platforms, GPS-based navigation tools, and digital payment systems to coordinate routes, set prices, and manage migrant movements, while also facilitating the production and circulation of falsified documents (Ministry of Interior, Criminal Intelligence and Analysis Department, 2025, стр. 50). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are increasingly used to advertise smuggling services, with migrants often selecting facilitators based on online visibility and peer recommendations (Zdravkova, Nofitoska, & Smilevska, 2023, p. 14; Council of Europe, 2021). Communication typically occurs through applications such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Messenger, combined with frequent changes of devices, SIM cards, and false digital identities, significantly complicating law enforcement efforts to trace criminal networks.

Despite these technological innovations, the core modus operandi of smuggling networks has remained relatively stable. Migrants are commonly gathered in organised locations in Athens or Thessaloniki, temporarily accommodated near the Greek–North Macedonian border, and then facilitated across irregularly. Upon entry into North Macedonia, migrants are housed in improvised shelters near the southern border or along railway lines, where onward movement is coordinated through trusted transnational and local facilitators. Residents are often recruited as guides due to their familiarity with terrain and evasion routes, while digital tools are used to minimise direct contact and avoid law enforcement. Payments are typically made in cash or via rapid money transfer systems, reinforcing the clandestine and resilient nature of these networks (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025, pp. 51-52). North Macedonia therefore continues to function primarily as a transit country within these networks, with organised criminal groups operating at local, regional, national, and international levels. The growing number of investigations and detected cases reflects both the persistence of migrant smuggling activities and the capacity of criminal organisations to adapt rapidly to enforcement pressure, technological change, and evolving migration and border control policies.

Statistics

Following the closure of the Western Balkan route in March 2016, North Macedonia experienced significant fluctuations in irregular migration and smuggling-related activity. In 2016, over 127,000 attempts at irregular border crossing were recorded, alongside more than 100 detected smuggling cases and over 120 identified potential victims of human trafficking, including a substantial number of children (Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, 2019). In 2017, these figures declined sharply, reflecting tightened border controls and enforcement measures, with just over 4,000 recorded irregular entries and a reduced number of smuggling cases (Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, 2019). In 2017, institutions identified 97 potential victims of human trafficking, 75 of whom were migrants (National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration, 2018). From 2018 onward, irregular migration and smuggling activity increased again, with nearly 17,000 irregular entry attempts in 2018 and over 24,600 in 2019, accompanied by a rise in detected smuggling cases and the dismantling of multiple organised criminal groups. These trends indicate a renewed activation of smuggling networks and the continued adaptability of organised criminal groups in response to policy shifts and enforcement pressure. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic initially led to a decline in detected crossings due to border closures; however, smuggling activity quickly resumed, underscoring the resilience of illicit facilitation networks despite restrictive measures (Kosevaliska, Maksimova, & Nikodinovska, 2022, стр. 256-257). According to the Ministry of Interior, over 94 thousand attempts by migrants to irregularly cross the borders were prevented in the period from 2020 to 2023 (Ministry of Interior, Criminal Intelligence and Analysis Department, 2025, стр. 51).

Table 1. Number of irregular migrants detected by the Ministry of Interior by year

Year	Irregular migrants
2015	389,552
2016	127,358
2017	4,129
2018	16,895
2019	24,601
2020	32,110
2021	20,874
2022	27,394
2023	13,954
2024	6,089

Source: Ministry of Interior, https://mvr.gov.mk/mk-MK/analizi-i-statistiki/zbirna-analiza

Longitudinal data on irregular border crossings in North Macedonia between 2010 and 2024 show pronounced fluctuations closely linked to policy changes, geopolitical developments, and migration governance along the Western Balkan route. The most significant increase occurred during the peak of the migrant crisis in 2015–2016, driven primarily by nationals of Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq fleeing armed conflict and instability. While Syrian numbers declined after 2016, Afghan and Pakistani nationals remained prominent in subsequent years, with migration flows becoming more diversified from 2018 onward. In the post-crisis and pandemic period (2020–2024), overall numbers fluctuated due to border closures, yet Afghan nationals remained a major group until 2022, alongside renewed increases in Syrian arrivals and declining numbers of Pakistani and other Asian nationals, suggesting route reconfigurations and shifting migration strategies (Ministry of Interior, 2025). The growing share of 'other' nationalities further indicates increased heterogeneity in migrant origins and the diversification of smuggling networks' clientele.

Table 2 demonstrates that convictions for migrant smuggling consistently and substantially exceed those for human trafficking and child trafficking, reflecting an enforcement focus on facilitation offences. While smuggling convictions increased after 2015 and peaked in 2022, trafficking-related convictions remained low and uneven, reinforcing concerns that exploitation is systematically under-identified or reclassified as smuggling within institutional practice.

Table 2. Total convicted persons

	....Smuggling of migrants	....Human trafficking	....Child trafficking
2015	177	4	6
2016	73	1	-
2017	50	1	-
2018	39	6	-
2019	59	-	4
2020	52	-	6
2021	90	1	7
2022	111	3	1
2023	106	5	10
2024	101	7	8

Source: State Statistics Office, https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef

External Monitoring and Persistent Identification Gaps

Over an extended period, the United States Department of State has consistently highlighted that migrants and refugees transiting through or being smuggled via North Macedonia, particularly women and unaccompanied children, remain at heightened risk of human trafficking, including exploitation by smugglers and other actors within mixed migration flows. This pattern, first identified during the early stages of the migration crisis, has persisted and is reaffirmed in recent assessments, including the latest 2024 reporting cycle. They stressed that governmental and civil society stakeholders have continued to raise concerns regarding insufficient proactive identification mechanisms within certain state institutions. Also, according to the US Department of State, local police have not systematically screened for trafficking indicators during law enforcement operations in venues such as casinos, nightclubs, and bars. Likewise, border authorities have not consistently applied trafficking indicator checks at border crossing points. In addition, reports have documented instances of abuse and irregular return practices involving migrants, further complicating effective victim identification and protection efforts (US Department of State, 2024). The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period; therefore, North Macedonia remained on Tier 2 even in 2025 (U.S. Embassy North Macedonia, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that human trafficking and migrant smuggling in North Macedonia cannot be understood as distinct or isolated criminal phenomena. Rather, they operate within a shared operational and organisational space characterised by convergence, adaptability, and polycriminality. Especially, having in mind the past events (the closure of borders along the Balkan route in 2016), we witnessed how the inability to continue the third transit increased the risks of refugees and migrants becoming victims of migrant smuggling, but especially human trafficking (Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, 2019, p. 31). Organised criminal groups along the Western Balkan route have consistently demonstrated their capacity to reconfigure routes, modify logistical arrangements, and integrate new technologies and facilitators in response to evolving migration policies and enforcement practices. These adaptive strategies confirm the relevance of network-based and opportunity-structure approaches to understanding contemporary transnational organised crime.

Restrictive migration and border control measures in North Macedonia, including route closures and pandemic restrictions, did not halt irregular movement but redirected it into clandestine channels, enabling organised criminal networks to convert regulatory constraints into expanded smuggling opportunities and increased migrant dependency on illicit facilitation. A central analytical finding concerns the persistent misclassification of trafficking as smuggling within mixed migration flows (OSCE, 2017, p. 16). Despite the existence of a formal legal and institutional framework aligned with international standards, frontline practices continue to prioritise migration control and registration over proactive victim identification. This institutional emphasis contributes to the under-detection of trafficking, particularly in transit contexts where migrants move rapidly and are reluctant to cooperate due to fear, trauma, and dependency on facilitators. As a result, trafficking remains structurally under-identified, while smuggling-related enforcement dominates criminal justice responses.

The statistical dominance of convictions for migrant smuggling over those for human and child trafficking. Even during periods of heightened vulnerability, it reflects a systemic tendency to frame exploitation through facilitation offences, thereby obscuring trafficking, weakening victim-centred responses, and undermining international anti-trafficking standards. The increasing digitalisation of smuggling operations represents another key dimension of criminal adaptation. The extensive use of encrypted communication platforms, rapid money transfer systems, navigation technologies, and false digital identities demonstrates how organised criminal groups have integrated technological innovation into their operational models. These developments enhance network resilience, complicate law enforcement detection, and facilitate decentralised coordination across borders. The North Macedonian case thus exemplifies broader regional (Milešević Plavšić, Delić, Grujičić, Ćurko, & Najdanović, 2025) and European trends (Council of Europe, 2021) in which organised crime increasingly combines physical and digital infrastructures to optimise logistics and reduce exposure to enforcement.

At the institutional level, North Macedonia has undertaken significant reforms, including the adoption of national strategies, the establishment of specialised units, the revision of SOPs, and enhanced cooperation with Frontex. These measures indicate growing institutional awareness and capacity. However, the findings suggest that these advances have not yet fully translated into consistent practice, particularly regarding victim identification, protection, and the practical differentiation between smuggling and trafficking. The continued Tier 2 classification in international monitoring reports reflects this gap between formal compliance and operational effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that human trafficking and migrant smuggling networks operating along the Western Balkan route, particularly in North Macedonia, have adapted to changing migration policies through flexible, network-based structures that exploit regulatory and institutional gaps. Rather than reducing criminal activity, restrictive migration governance has reshaped opportunity structures, reinforcing reliance on smuggling services and facilitating the convergence of smuggling and trafficking practices.

The North Macedonian case illustrates the structural vulnerabilities of transit countries, where despite legislative reforms and institutional efforts, persistent weaknesses in victim identification and frontline implementation continue to limit effective differentiation between smuggling and trafficking. As a result, trafficking remains systematically under-detected within mixed migration flows, undermining victim protection and compliance with international human rights obligations.

The findings underscore that effective responses must extend beyond border enforcement to include victim-centred identification mechanisms, specialised training, and stronger operational alignment with international anti-trafficking standards. More broadly, the study contributes to scholarship on transnational crime by demonstrating how organised criminal networks transform policy constraints into strategic advantages, highlighting the need for migration governance frameworks that reduce, rather than reproduce, conditions enabling trafficking and exploitation.

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ИНОВАЦИЈЕ У ТРАНСНАЦИОНАЛНОМ КРИМИНАЛУ: КАКО СЕ МРЕЖЕ ЗА ТРГОВИНУ ЉУДИМА ПРИЛАГОЂАВАЈУ МИГРАЦИОНИМ ПОЛИТИКАМА – ОДГОВОР СЕВЕРНЕ МАКЕДОНИЈЕ ТОКОМ ДУГОТРАЈНЕ ЕВРОПСКЕ МИГРАНТСКЕ КРИЗЕ

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Резиме

Рад анализира начин на који се транснационалне организоване криминалне мреже укључене у кријумчарење миграната и трговину људима прилагођавају променама миграционих политика и режима контроле граница дуж Западнобалканске руте, са посебним фокусом на Републику Северну Македонију као кључну транзитну државу. Полазећи од криминолошких теоријских приступа о адаптабилности организованог криминала, конвергенцији криминалних тржишта и мрежној структури криминалних организација, истраживање обухвата период од врхунца европске мигрантске кризе 2015. године до 2024. године, укључујући посткризни и пандемијом обележен контекст.

Рад се заснива на комбинацији квалитативне и квантитативне анализе, користећи званичне статистичке податке, националне и међународне извештаје, релевантне правне изворе и стратешке документе. Анализа показује да рестриктивне миграционе политике, затварање граница и појачане мере надзора нису довеле до престанка нерегуларних миграција, већ су трансформисале структуре криминалних прилика, повећавајући зависност миграната од услуга кријумчара и олакшавајући прелазак из кријумчарења у експлоатацију и трговину људима. Посебан акценат стављен је на институционалне изазове у разликовању ова два кривична дела у оквиру мешаних миграционих токова. Упркос постојању законодавног и стратешког оквира, пракса показује да се трговина људима често погрешно квалификује као кријумчарење миграната, што доводи до недовољне идентификације жртава, ограничене заштите и слабијих кривичноправних реакција. Статистички подаци потврђују изражен дисбаланс између броја осуђујућих пресуда за кријумчарење миграната и знатно мањег броја пресуда за трговину људима.

Рад закључује да Северна Македонија, као транзитна држава, има кључну улогу у регионалној безбедносној архитектури, те да ефикасан одговор на ове појаве захтева не само јачање граничне контроле, већ и систематску примену приступа усмереног на жртве, унапређење обуке службеника на првој линији и снажније повезивање миграционог управљања са међународним стандардима борбе против трговине људима.