Irregular migration in Macedonia

6 months outreach report in Lipkovo Municipality (villages Vaksince and Lojane)
Context

Due to securitization of borders along the Western Balkan migration route and closure of the unofficial humanitarian corridor for migration towards Western Europe in March 2016, the region has been facing with boosting of the existing irregular migration channels. Irregular movements of vulnerable population have been noted in all of the countries in the region. The securitization of the borders has contributed to dispersal of the irregular movements and increasing of the risks to the population using the irregular transit channels.

The ones that decide to travel through the Western Balkans cross the Macedonian border, usually in the surroundings of Gevgelija and Dojran and fewer in the surroundings of Bitola, then continue towards Serbia (near to the crossing point of Tabanovce) with an aim to reach the countries of Western Europe. The targeted entry point into the Schengen zone is usually Hungary.

The increased demand of trip facilitators due to lack of regular and legal ways of transit towards Western Europe has reinforced the organized crime groups along the route. Irregular migration is becoming more and more organized and serious where criminal groups closely cooperate, regardless of their nationalities and ethnicities, while the “smuggling of migrants” has transnational character. When planning their route the refugees/migrants consult criminals and become potential victims of human traffickers. Moreover, this method of operation might pose serious risks to the life and health of the refugees/migrants.

LEGIS has been monitoring the flow of people fleeing towards Western European countries due to political or economic reasons crossing the territory of Macedonia by irregular transit channels in the past 2 years, with focus on Lipkovo area in the northeast part of Macedonia. We have observed boosting and decrease of the numbers of refugees and migrants using this channel, having in mind the legal changes made by the Macedonian government restricting the availability of safe and legal means of transit through the country. On November 19th 2015, the Macedonian authorities started profiling refugees based on their nationality and Country of origin, declining entrance and transit to people of non-SIA nationalities, increase was observed in number of people using this channel to transit towards Western Europe. Starting March 2016, when borders were shut and complete restriction of onward movement was established by the Western Balkan Countries, starting with Macedonia, the Lipkovo area was once again overcrowded with people fleeing war or socio-economic deprivation from the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa.

The Lipkovo municipality is situated in the northeast part of Macedonia, with 22 villages under its authority. Two of those villages, Vaksince and Lojane, situated in close proximity of the Serbian border, have been a main stopping point for irregular migrants in transit for many years and a hub for organized crime groups that facilitate irregular migration across the so called Western Balkan Route. In these villages, refugees and migrants in irregular transit are provided with accommodation and rest before they continue their way. Some of them are accommodated in private houses while others sleep in the surrounding hillside forests. To Lipkovo, the people in irregular transit are transported with passenger vehicles and vans, as well as with public transport means like trains and busses, while some cross Macedonia on foot to reach the villages and cross into Serbia.
LEGIS’ OUTREACH in Lipkovo

LEGIS established official daily operations in the Lipkovo area in August 2016, with field office in Lojane village. The purpose of this operation is to provide humanitarian aid to the population in transit, protection with presence, medical and other referrals, as well as monitor Human Rights abuses and other violations to vulnerable population by State and non-state actors.

For the period of 25th of August 2016 to 31st January 2017, LEGIS Field teams managed to reach out and provide assistance to 3486 people in transit in the Lipkovo area. The total number of the so-called “migrant population” reached, vary per month, with highest outreach in November 2016 with 773 refugees/migrants assisted by LEGIS’ teams.

The age and gender breakdown of the population in transit documented by LEGIS’ teams shows that 22% of the people in transit are women and children. 52% are men, while 26% remain unknown (were not profiled upon assistance).

Starting 25th of August 2016 to 31st of January 2017, LEGIS has profiled the age and gender of total of 2564 persons. 332 of those are women, and 416 are children. Most of the children, 342, are below 13 years of age. The encountered women and children were often accompanied by family members or people presented as family members. The impossibility to confirm family connections due to lack of documentation, fear and short time of encounter, entails the possibility of various abuses and violations to vulnerable population in transit.
Having the age and gender desegregation per month of the population reached in Lipkovo, one can conclude that the highest number of women are reached and assisted in September 2016, while the highest number of children reached and assisted per month is in October 2016. The number of children per month is relatively stable since September 2016 and it fluctuates from 81 to 91 children per month. However, in January 2017 we've noticed a small decline in number of children reached, or total of 57 children, all of them below 13 years of age and apparently accompanied by at least one close family member. Starting on 25th of August 2016 to 31st of January 2017, LEGIS has profiled 2647 persons by Country of Origin, out of 3486 reached in irregular transit in Lipkovo: 33% were from Pakistan, 25% from Afghanistan, 8% from Syria, 3% from Iraq, 8% from other countries and 24% were not profiled by Country of Origin.

From the Country of Origin breakdown by month it's noticed slight decrease in number of population in transit coming from Pakistan in December 2016 and January 2017, and gradual increase of number of the people in transit coming from Afghanistan since October 2016. The number of population in transit from Syria is highest in October 2016, and decreases in December 2016 and January 2017. Number of people in transit from Iraq remains low during the monitoring period.

Regarding other countries of origin, the population in transit comes from North and East African countries, Gaza, Iran, Bangladesh and Nepal.
One of the reasons for these demographics of the population in transit can be found in the accessibility to regular and safe channels for migration. The Syrian population residing in Greece has access to shelter, food and various services offered by the humanitarian SCOs, INGOs, as well as access to the relocation programme to Europe. The population coming from Afghanistan even though having access to shelter and various services in Greece, is not allowed access to the relocation to Europe programme, while the population coming from Pakistan are not allowed to access shelter and services.

**SPECIFIC RISKS of IRREGULAR TRANSIT**

Before presenting the mapped risks during our operation in Lipkovo, it’s important to note the difficulties that LEGIS’ teams faced in the process of mapping the risks and abuses refugee/migrant population faced while in irregular transit in Macedonia.

- Trust/fear towards/from the trip facilitators (smugglers);
- Fear of police, detention and deportation;
- Mistrust in 3rd parties based on experience;
- Short time of interception;
- Belief that the transactions made or abuses survived are suitable to the received service;
- Language barriers.

Beside these challenges faced on daily level, put team managed to record and map the following risk categories, on the basis of recorded violations and testimonies of the targeted population in irregular transit:

- General Risks connected with irregular migration;
- Risks of engaging with state Authorities;
- Risks of engaging with trip facilitators (smugglers).

**GENERAL RISKS connected with IREGULAR MIGRATION**

**General Risks** are considered the often in-avoidable in the irregular transit of individuals or groups, and are connected with long travels on foot or with other means, long exposure to drastic atmospheric influences such as very low or very
high temperatures, and lack of access to proper nutrition or clean water in the time of the transit, lack of access to medical aid etc. Many of the children we encounter which reside with their families, often for days in the wild-camps, have diarrhea due to the lack of hygienic conditions and the unsafe water they drink from local streams. Beside the other pollutants, the water in Lojane is polluted with Arsenic, due to the natural richness of the surrounding hills and the exposed arsenic wasteland near the arsenic mine between the villages Vaksince and Lojane.

Attacks by local criminal groups are also risk that often has been encountered by refugees/migrants in irregular transit, and often those groups have been armed with knives and sometimes fire arms. The noted attacks by local criminal groups are usually motivated to rob the refugee/migrants groups, and usually they take their phones and/or other valuable belongings, including money they carry. According to the testimonies of the victims, the groups were usually armed with knives or fire arms.

RISKS of ENGAGING with STATE AUTHORITIES

State authorities, especially border police are the first instance to ensuring access to asylum procedures and protection. Refugees in irregular transit in Macedonia are often denied access to asylum procedure by police officers with various excuses. One of the most common is that the asylum seekers reception center is full, therefore no more asylum applications can be accepted. Another constraint in filing the asylum applications is the latest amendment of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection of the Republic of Macedonia, where the institute 3rd safe country of entrance is clearly defined as any country member of EU, NATO, EFTA. This means that filed asylum applications by refugees entering from all of the neighboring countries, including Greece, will be considered clearly unsubstantial and those asylum seekers will be returned in the 3rd safe country they entered from.

Denying access to territory to vulnerable population is a human right violation, but regular occurrence to refuge/migrant population in irregular transit while trying to cross to Serbia, as well as deportations from Serbia without regular procedures.

For the purpose of better understanding the tendencies of the Serbian authorities towards this particular human rights abuse and the frequency of occurrence, we differentiated the denied access to territory or known as push-backs and the deportations without regular procedure – or mass expulsion. The differentiation is made according to the length of stay and the depth of accessing Serbian territory:

- pushback is considered when refugee/migrant population reached the borderline and accessed the territory in Serbia without reaching any reception center and/or town, and have stayed 2 days or less before the Serbian authorities pushed them back on
Macedonian territory in one or multiple occasions;

- expulsion is considered when refugees entered deeper in Serbia, reached a camp where they were registered and/or stayed 3 or more days in Serbia before the Serbian authorities expelled them back to Macedonia without respect of regular procedure.

According to our database, starting 25th of August 2016 to 31st of January 2017 LEGIS has registered 770 pushbacks and 620 expulsions, or a total of 1390.

The highest number of pushbacks was registered in November 2016 with 176 refugees who on one or several occasions were denied entrance to Serbian territory. The highest number of expulsions from Serbian territory to refugees staying 3 days to 5 months in Serbia, registered in camps in Sid, Subotica, Belgrade, Presevo etc, was in November 2016, with 304 registered expulsions.

Many of those were firstly rounded up in reception and accommodation centers in Serbia and transferred with busses to the reception center in Presevo, or directly taken to borderline area with Macedonia and expelled on green border zone, in the middle of the night. Many stated that their registration documents of the reception centers they were residing in were forcefully taken by Serbian Police, although many managed to keep their food and NFI distribution cards.

Many of the refugees that were pushed-back or expelled by Serbian authorities stated that they were not informed of where they were to be taken and violence was used by the authorities. Some stated that they have been robbed and threatened, and they were not allowed the possibility to file a claim for asylum.

Some of the people that were expelled from Serbia to Macedonia primarily entered Serbia trough Bulgaria and found themselves in an unknown
We tried to cross the border and to reach in the first village of Serbia when the Serbian police caught us and they said to us: 'if you come one more time in Serbia we will kill you!'

We arrived in Slovenia where the police caught us and they deported us to Croatia from there they immediately deported us to Serbia and the Serbian police used force with us and deported us to Macedonia.”

Serbian police caught us while we tried to pass the border to Serbia and they said to us go back and they took from us 2 phones and all the money we

Age and Gender Breakdown of Pushbacks/Expulsions

According to our statistics starting 25th of August 2016 to 31st January 2017, out of the total number of registered pushback and expulsions from Serbia, 9% were women and 13% were children.

Out of the population in transit from Greece trough Macedonia, trying to access Serbia in the area of Lojane-Miratovac that were denied access to the Serbian territory and possibility to claim international protection on one or multiple
We came all the way from Gevgelija to Vaksince walking. There we met one person from Pakistan and he took us in one house, hours later he came and threatened us saying that if you don’t give me 1500 $ I won’t let you go out but at night somehow we escaped from there.

Out of the population in transit that reached Serbia and stayed on Serbian territory 3 days to 5 months, reached a larger populated area and/or reception center where they were registered in, and was rounded up by Serbian authorities and without regular procedure was expelled to Macedonian territory, 38 were women and 63 were children.

Most of the population that was pushed back or expelled managed to find another way to continue their road towards their final destinations. In the months of October, November and December, Macedonian police was conducting similar actions of rounding up population in irregular transit in the Lipkovo area. No follow up activities were conducted to know what happened to the population that was taken during those police actions.

RISKS of ENGAGING with TRIP FACILITATORS

Most of the refugees in irregular transit through Macedonia use the costly services of trip facilitators – smugglers to crossover to and transit through Macedonia, and crossover to Serbia. Many of the refugee/migrant population arriving in Lipkovo have done so guided by a smuggler, transported often with cars and vans as well as on foot.

Once in Lipkovo, the refugee/migrant population is “sheltered” by the trip facilitators in local houses or barns, or they are left outside and in provisional shelters in the surrounding hills and mountains of Vaksince and Lojane village (wild-camps, caves, abandoned houses and other objects), to await for a possibility to crossover to Serbia.

Not knowing the area and in fear of police, they often stay in hiding, inside the houses/barns or in the wild-camps for days, completely dependent on the services the smugglers provide for them. Often the smugglers neglect their refugee/migrant customers, leaving them without food and water for days.

During LEGIS’ field teams regular visits to the wild-camps in Lojane, we often encounter men, women and children that were left without food for one day to four days, while they drink polluted water from the local streams.

Other regular occurrence that we mapped by regular interviews with the population we reach is money extortion by the smugglers. The previously arranged price for the services of cross-border irregular transfer often increases in Lipkovo area. Smugglers use treats and forms of violence to extort the money from the population in transit, and often leave the families and individuals info@legis.mk
that cannot cover the extra costs on their own, in a very vulnerable position.

Kidnapping is another tool used by the smuggling networks to make bigger financial gain from the population in irregular transit through Lipkovo. In 2015, Channel 4 published a video report about a house in Vaksince used by the smuggling networks to detain refugees in transit in order to extort money from them or their families.

According to our encounters with population in transit that were kidnapped but managed to escape and reach LEGIS’ office and teams, firearms and knives are often used to threat the kidnapped individuals and families, and they are left without food and basic needs, in dreadful conditions.

The kidnapped people in transit that managed to escape and that were encountered by LEGIS’ teams are often stating that they witnessed violence towards some of the female hostages, including sexual violence. Due to the sensitivity of the situation and their fear of detention and longer delay, they usually refuse to file official police report or direct police towards the houses they were kept in, so such occurrences remain unconfirmed up-to-date.

Other forms of trafficking were never officially confirmed, but LEGIS has strong reasons to believe that some of the population in transit, especially vulnerable groups such as youth and unaccompanied minors, are recruited by the smuggling networks to guide groups of refugees in order to obtain credit for their own transfer towards Europe.
Conclusions

Irregular migration is a problem faced by the Balkan countries, including Macedonia, and it’s directly connected with the overall policy of the countries towards migration, and/or with the non-applicability of procedures aiming to protect population in irregular transit.

Restrictive admission policies by nationality or other factors, irrelevant to seeking of international protection, affects the ability of states to incline towards violations of Human Rights instead of protections of the rights and freedoms of all humanity.

Restrictive admission policies and securitization of borders don’t affect the cessation of irregular migration, but affect the boost and fuelling of the smuggling, trafficking and organized crime channels, thus increase the risks that vulnerable population faces while in irregular transit.

Vulnerable population in irregular transit in lack of / unaware of possibility for protection, in fear of detention and deportation from the authorities, hasten by various reasons to reach their final destination in Western Europe, withstands threats, violations and abuses without reporting the violators to the authorities, or when the violators are certain authorities, lacks the will or the information on means to pursue justice on higher instances.