

## **The Role of Human Smuggling Networks in Migration**

### *Special focus on the Western Balkan route*

**XXI. National Conference – 20 November 2018**

#### **Hungarian Ministry of Interior**

On the 20th of November, the Hungarian EMN National Contact Point hosted the 21st National Conference on the topic of human smuggling networks and their role in migration, with a special focus on the Western Balkan route. The conference took place in the central building of the Ministry of Interior in Budapest, and lasted for half a day.

Participants were welcomed by **Dr. Gábor Tóthi**, the Head of Department for European Cooperation of the Ministry. Dr. Tóthi introduced the topic of the conference by stressing how the vastity of the migratory phenomenon into Europe is a huge challenge under many aspects, including that of security. According to him, in fact, migration entails serious risks, one of which is that of the formation and development of organised crime, human smuggling being a considerable example. Following several recent UN declarations, as well as the EU's new approach to the phenomenon of human smuggling, it is clear, according to Dr. Tóthi, that there is a strong international will toward stopping this activity and finding solutions. This is why this conference was organised on the topic of human smuggling.

The first speaker at the conference was **Gábor Balog**, from the Counter Illegal Migration Division of the Hungarian National Bureau of Investigation. Mr. Balog specified at the very beginning that his presentation would focus on the aspect of crime prevention when it comes to smuggling, and started by presenting the Hungarian experience. In 2015, when migration numbers rose and the public opinion started focusing on the topic, Hungary took several actions, both physical and legal, which according to him turned out to be very suitable to stop illegal migration to Hungary. Legally, for instance, Hungary amended its legislation in order to include a definition of human smuggling, thereby making smugglers become a recognised actor under Hungarian law. A physical border closure succeeded in 2017, when a double fence was built on several kilometres of Hungarian border and camera installed along it so to send pictures at the central command centre. This measure was in Mr. Balog's view very effective, since it substantially limited illegal migration into the country. Pictures of different methods of human smuggling were then showed to the audience (in modified trucks, cars, vans and similar), together with examples of past attempts of smuggling that the Hungarian border police dealt with (which in one occasion even included smuggling by an airplane without permit). Towards the end of the presentation, a detailed overview of each of the Hungarian borders to Southern and Eastern neighbouring countries (Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Ukraine) was provided, which focused mostly on the current border situation as well as on successful bilateral cooperation between border countries.

The following speaker was **Abdessamad Belhaj**, researcher at the Migration Research Institute. Mr. Belhaj's presentation dealt with smuggling as a social and political problem which he thinks it is not fully understood. As a starting point, according to the researcher, it has to be agreed on the definition, and on the fact that this activity represents a crime. We also need to focus more, in Mr. Belhaj's words, on the connections between migrants and

smugglers. One of the central parts of the presentation was the analysis and comparison of two international documents, the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000) and the EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (2016-2020). According to the speaker, both documents present valid points, but have several shortcomings, the main of which being that they both relieve the illegal migrants of their responsibilities by depicting them only as victims and focusing exclusively on the smugglers. The presentation also suggested some measures against smuggling that should be adopted: a more decisive approach to return of migrants, a stronger focus on Internet searches (mostly social media, which are widely used by smuggling „agencies“ to communicate with their „clients“) and generally a tightening of measures in order to stop what is according to him currently the fastest growing criminal market in Europe.

After a round of Questions and Answers and a coffee break, it was the turn of the third presentation, held by **András Ányos** from Europol. Mr. Ányos intervention was aimed at presenting Europol's operative measures and the recent trends that the Agency has observed in the past few years. Europol, with its headquarters in The Hague, was presented by Mr. Ányos as an Agency whose aim is to support Member States in the fight against organised crime and terrorism. The overall European migration trend observed by the Agency for the year 2017 presented a drop of 31% compared to last years, making 2017 the year with the lowest rate of migration movements since 2013. The Central Mediterranean route has seen a quite low pressure, while the pressure has shifted to Western and even more Eastern Mediterranean. When it comes to the Balkan route, the main route has always seen a quite low pressure, whereas alternative routes, such as the „Adriatic coastal route“, are more and more used. Mr. Ányos talked about Croatia as being one of the main transit land, very busy in detecting smuggling traffic. Europol's efforts are increasingly being directed towards detecting smuggling also through international money transfer mechanisms, such as the Hawala system or Western Union, which are widely used by smugglers and migrants but that are very hard to control.

The fourth and last speaker to intervene in the conference was **Ana Tomašević Petrović** from the Service for Combating Organized Crime of the Serbian Ministry of Interior. Ms. Tomašević Petrović presented the ways in which the Republic of Serbia has been trying to counteract to the phenomenon of human smuggling in the recent years. On the legal level, for instance, the Serbian Penal Code was modified to introduce an article on human trafficking and smuggling. On the practical level, one of the biggest problems that the Serbian officers have to face regards the translation, mostly to and from Urdu, Pashtu, Dari, Punjabi. This problem is being overcome by cooperation with other countries who offered help, such as Austria in this case. Other issues faced by Serbian units are, again, controlling international money transfer mechanisms as well as social networks and messenger services. The fact that organised groups quickly adapt to changes was also underlined by Ms. Tomašević Petrović who terminated her intervention by presenting two recent examples of success in combating human smuggling from Serbian Service for Combating Organized Crime, namely the Aspera case (2017) and the Labda case (2018).

This last presentation was followed by another Questions and Answers session and by closing remarks by the moderators.