
“ALL ROADS LEAD TO SARAJEVO:” THE CAPITAL OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AS A SUITABLE PLACE FOR TRAFFICKING OF MIGRANTS

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Key words: Human trafficking, migrants, Sarajevo, urban crime

Between 2018 and 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), as one of the countries on the ‘mixed migration’ routes through the Western Balkans,² was the transit (or exceptionally destination) point for about 70.000 migrants (UN, 2021). In January 2021, approximately 8.700 asylum seekers and immigrants, around 3.000 of whom were not accommodated in formal centres (ACAPS, 2021). Because two-third’s of the country’s border adjoins the European Union (EU), B&H seems like a promising ‘staging-post’ for continuing the journey. However, migrants usually remain ‘stuck’ before strictly protected Croatian/EU borders and decide to move back to Serbia or Montenegro (see, for example, EUROPOL, 2020). Consequently, the migrant population remains longer than expected, and 36% of all asylum seekers in the Western Balkans countries are in B&H (UNHCR, 2021).

Migrants remain highly vulnerable to human trafficking (see also Fouladvand & Ward, 2019). According to the routine activity theory, suppose there is a ‘suitable victim’ and a ‘motivated offender’ (Cohen and Felson, 1979). In that case, a crime will occur in the most suitable space - the place with the ‘absence of capable guardian.’

In this brief, we aim to describe the advantages that urban areas in B&H may have for traffickers of people who migrate into B&H. The brief is based on unpublished data collected for the study “The phenomenon of child trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”³ As this is an ongoing project, six follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted in December 2021. The interviewees

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² ‘Mixed migration’ is a relatively new term which means complex migratory population movement, including refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants and other types of migrants.

³ The full research report, including description of the methodological approach, is available as Dottridge et al. (2021). *The phenomenon of child trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Council of Europe.

included representatives from the Border Police, the State Investigation and Protection Agency, the Federal Administration for Inspection Affairs, the Service for Foreigner's Affairs, and two interviews with managers of the five main migrant camps in B&H.

Bearing in mind the significant conceptual and methodological issues associated with human trafficking in general, and in our specific research project (see Winterdyk and Jones, 2020), several preliminary observations can be made. Most of the (potential) cases of human trafficking, where the (possible) victims were migrants, are linked with Sarajevo, the country's largest urban area and administration centre. From an offender's point of view, Sarajevo offers some advantages to human traffickers:

- *Most migrants come to Sarajevo and then look for opportunities to continue their journey.* There are two predominant explanations for this fact: (1) *Administrative.* It is operationalized through the official guidelines for the migrant population on how to seek asylum and/or reach a temporary reception centre. Officially, migrants do not necessarily need to reach Sarajevo, but their experiences are quickly shared among the migrant population and suggest this way as the most certain. Only when migrants arrive in Sarajevo can they be sure the border police will not catch them and automatically return them to the border to be 'pushed back.' (2) *Practical.* Bearing in mind that most undocumented migrants rely on smugglers, the second explanation is that this routine is established by migrant smuggling, probably as per a plan of the key actors in human smuggling networks. Organizers of human smuggling are usually located in Sarajevo, where they coordinate activities. They are usually citizens of the countries migrants come from, so these smugglers need big cities to stay more 'invisible'. At the same time, smuggling organizers need personal contact with their 'clients' to increase perceived reliability in what they (can) do. Organizers advertise 'prices' for their smuggling services (e.g., a safe road from Serbia to Sarajevo is more affordable than from Sarajevo to the EU). They will even offer 'loans' to smuggle migrants. Smugglers use various strategies to ensure that migrants' pay the loan back', such as the migrants being involved in Sarajevo's different black markets with which organizers are very well connected. This highlights that in Sarajevo, the line between involvement in human smuggling and human trafficking is often blurred (see Žurnal, 2021).
- *Sarajevo is a centre for vibrant black markets with high demand for cheap workforce and sexual services:* For various reasons, including those described above, many migrants owe money to organizers. They are indebted not only for "the safe smuggling" to or from Sarajevo but also for accommodation costs, food, clothes, and mobile phones, which are essential tools in the process. Usually, organizers of smuggling and unofficial leaders of groups of migrants offer services in the black markets. While women (usually accommodated in reception centres near Sarajevo) and young boys are 'the most attractive' for sexual exploitation, others face labour exploitation. Additionally, unlike other cities/towns in B&H, migrants in Sarajevo find private apartments/rooms as part of the black market. People who cooperate with smuggling organizers usually rent these apartments for significantly higher prices than average. By investigating potential human

trafficking and migrant smuggling, law enforcement agencies identified two sorts of clients who routinely rent these apartments. The first category includes individuals or small groups (usually young men) with sufficient financial resources who need shelter for a relatively short period when in transit and before they continue 'their journey'. The second category includes so-called 'fake families' or 'male families' with usually one child (an adolescent), where adults use an adolescent to 'earn' money. Usually, in coordination with 'smuggling organizers,' fake families expose the child to sexual or labour exploitation, including forced begging on the streets.

- *Sarajevo offers opportunities for what traffickers define as 'successful begging' on the streets:* Besides those migrants who 'voluntarily' beg on the streets as individuals, there is also organized forced begging. Primarily young males are scattered throughout Sarajevo, and they take positions in the busiest streets and shopping centres. They keep their jobs all day, protecting them from forced beggars of other nationalities. Earned money goes to the organizer of begging (usually smuggler organizers or leaders of a national group) for 'paying the loan back' or paying for future actions towards Western European countries.

The findings here are only a preliminary account of Sarajevo as a critical urban hub for the trafficking of migrants in the context of an ongoing project on human trafficking in B&H. This Brief highlights several new points for future discussions and offers insights for future research. Although different methodological approaches are desirable, further victimization studies would significantly contribute to the overall knowledge in migrant trafficking, bearing in mind how seldom they have been conducted.

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