

COUNTRY FACTSHEET* – Smuggling of migrants



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LEGAL AND JUDICIAL INFORMATION ON MIGRANT SMUGGLING

MONTENEGRO

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GENERAL INFORMATION ON MIGRATION



MAIN FIGURES AND TRENDS

Smuggling of persons refers to the illegal transfer of persons across state borders with their consent, where the smuggler's primary goal is to make/gain material profit. This activity is usually organized and involves entire criminal networks that plan routes, provide false documents, and organize transportation. People who use these services often find themselves in dangerous situations during travel, sometimes exposed to violence and inhumane conditions, facing great risks to their lives and health.

Illegal migration, on the other hand, refers to entering or remaining in a country without the necessary permits. The person's motivation for such behavior is mainly the search for better economic conditions, political instability, and war escalation, as well as the desire for a safer life. Persons in an illegal status are often socially and legally unprotected, which makes them more susceptible to various forms of abuse.

These two phenomena are also connected by the fact that they are often part of a wider criminal picture - a segment of organized crime - and as such, they represent a serious challenge for state institutions in Montenegro.

For most illegal migrants, Montenegro is not the final destination, but a transit country through which they travel to other destination countries (via the so-called "Western-Balkan route"). Considering the eastern border line largely stretches across mountain ranges and sparsely populated areas, the detection of illegal migrants requires adequate equipment of the border police to suppress and uncover/detect this type of cross-border crime.

Over five years, migrants predominantly used the route Turkey-Greece-North Macedonia. However, alternative routes have also been used, including a route through Bulgaria and a southern branch through Greece and Albania, which passes through of Montenegro. The political decisions of certain countries in the region, such as waiving visas for citizens of certain countries, have influenced the increase in the number of migrants on the Balkan route.

Another evident phenomenon, whose trend has shown continuity, and Montenegro has been facing it in recent years, is the number of persons seeking international temporary protection. Croatia's membership in the European Union and the shared external border represent an additional motive for the increased number of migrants in Montenegro.

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In addition to the traditional methods of smuggling (illegal crossings outside border crossing points), cases have been recorded in which migrants were transported hidden in cargo vehicles (tanker, food trucks, as well as off-road vehicles).

During 2025, Montenegro also registered cases of reported abductions and violence among migrant groups, where, through the use of weapons, threats, or force, attempts were made to extort money from migrants.

The organizers of migrant smuggling most often hire young men between the ages of 23 and 30, of lower financial status, who are themselves migrants. The families of these persons are also of low financial status and live in countries affected by economic crisis or wars. Montenegrin citizens, who are active in migrant smuggling, provide logistics, which is why local associates, transporters, and accommodation owners are often included in police actions, while the organizers are unavailable and often located outside the country. International smuggling networks receive strong logistical assistance from local helpers in Montenegro, who provide them with information on routes, bus lines, camp locations, taxi drivers, lodgings, money transfer methods, etc.

The starting basis for carrying out migrant smuggling activities lies in the knowledge that organized criminal groups have about routes and infrastructure, which they otherwise use for other criminal activities. This mainly refers to other forms of smuggling and the production and procurement of forged documents. In addition to falsified documents, genuine/original documents are occasionally used by individuals who bear physical resemblance to rightful owners.

MIGRATING ROUTES

Montenegro is committed to respecting international standards and strengthening its system, particularly in the area of border management and migration control.

In 2025, the central Mediterranean remained the most active migration route in the EU, at the same level as in 2024. Movements from Libya continued to be the key factor shaping departures to Italy. On the Eastern Mediterranean route, the number of registered migrants fell, continuing the downward trend. The West African route recorded the largest decrease, with the number of registered migrants reduced by around two-thirds, caused by a sharp drop in departures from Mauritania, Morocco, and Senegal.

Along the Western Balkans route, detections have also dropped significantly, supported by strengthened measures and close cooperation with Frontex, which is present in the region. New joint operations were launched in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, whereby reinforcing operational support on the ground. However, the Balkan region is still a transit area through which migrants move towards the countries of the European Union as their final destination.

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The Western Balkan route includes Romania, Hungary, Croatia, and Bulgaria. In 2025, detections on the Western Balkan route continued to decline sharply (-42%). The most frequently detected nationalities on this route were Turkish, Afghan, and Syrian.

In Montenegro, the number of registered migrants is at the same level in 2024 and 2025, showing how pressure can change quickly even when the broader regional picture indicates a decrease.

Illegal migrants and persons who are the subject of smuggling most often come from Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco, Iran, Sudan, Syria, and Bangladesh. These countries are sources of migrants due to various socio-economic and political challenges. Destination countries are: Austria, Slovenia, Germany, Sweden, France, and Great Britain.

During 2021, 3405 migrants were registered. The largest number of registered persons came from: Afghanistan - 1929, Morocco - 448, Iran - 316, Bangladesh - 315, Pakistan - 82, Algeria - 65, Cuba - 48, and Turkey - 40.

During 2022, 8519 migrants were registered. The largest number of registered persons came from: Afghanistan - 5181, Iran - 1284, Bangladesh - 698, Pakistan - 453, Morocco - 294, Russia - 59, Turkey - 56, Cuba - 27, and Algeria - 13.

During 2023, 5314 migrants were registered. The largest number of registered persons came from: Afghanistan - 2429, Iran - 747, Pakistan - 719, Bangladesh - 561, Morocco - 168, India - 101, Russia - 94, Turkey - 71, Nepal - 67, Germany - 46, Algeria - 18, and Cuba - 2.

During 2024, 3153 migrants were registered. The largest number of registered persons came from: Syria - 481, Afghanistan - 467, Iran - 425, Pakistan - 379, Egypt - 289, Morocco - 196, Somalia - 162, and Bangladesh - 119.

During 2025, 3165 migrants were registered in Montenegro. The largest number of registered persons came from: Bangladesh - 467, Afghanistan - 409, Egypt - 452, Pakistan - 433, Morocco - 121, Iran - 127, Sudan - 301, and Syria - 45.

Year 2026

In January, 220 migrants were registered, the largest number being citizens of: Sudan - 86, Egypt - 70, Algeria - 11, Afghanistan - 9, and others. In February, 454 migrants were registered, the largest number being citizens of: Sudan - 321, Egypt - 45, Afghanistan - 16, Pakistan - 10, and others.

Over the past five years, Montenegro has been used as a transit country for migrants. During the reporting period, there was an increased number of migrants entering the country. Consequently, there was an increase in the activities of their smuggling, as well as the number of persons involved in such activities.

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Recent smuggling trends involve individuals obtaining legal residence in Montenegro, often through employment, and subsequently using illegal routes to continue their journey—primarily to Bosnia and Herzegovina and, in some cases, to EU countries. These transfers are facilitated either by legally or illegally acquired visas for entry into the EU. Another form involves migrants who illegally enter the country from Albania, being transported by bus to Pljevlja or Nikšić, from where smugglers take them and transport them to BiH.

When it comes to Montenegro, the following 4 hotspots have been identified within the country:

1. Božaj - Two entry points to Montenegro: via the Skadar - Podgorica railway line and through Nikina, i.e., Djonova uvala. Using this route, migrants arrive at Drume, from where they either order transport vehicles without staying and registering in the camp, or they stay for a short time for registration and rest.
2. Nikšić - Operational findings indicate that the main meeting point is the bus station in Nikšić, from where migrants are increasingly being transported by vehicles to the immediate vicinity of the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina for financial gain.
3. Rožaje - A well-established route has been identified, namely: Peć-Boge-Krstac-Vrelo Ibra bus station or Peć-Boge-Krstac-Lokve Berane. Migrants are mostly Sudanese, moving in groups of three, with occasional cases involving nationals of Egypt and Algeria.
4. Pljevlja – In the municipality of Pljevlja, an increased influx of illegal migrants has been recorded, mostly citizens of Sudan, with a smaller number of Egyptians. Migrants arrive in Pljevlja by regular bus from Podgorica, in groups of five to eight. Most of them have certificates that they have expressed their intention to exercise their right to international protection in Montenegro. Upon arrival, migrants always move on foot from Pljevlja to Karovića Poljana. From there, they continue through the area of Svjetlo Borje, where they illegally cross the state border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then continue through Hanina Ponikva towards the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all the way to Goražde.



INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION

The fight against migrant smuggling in Montenegro is a joint effort of the police, the prosecutor's office, the courts, and the security services. The Operational Team for Combating Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling plays a significant role. It is a specialized body formed to detect and suppress human trafficking, human smuggling, and unauthorized border crossings. This team consists of representatives of the state prosecutor's office and the police.

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In institutional cooperation, the role of the police is particularly important, with an emphasis on the Border Police Sector - the Group for Suppression of Human Smuggling and Cross-Border Crime, i.e., the Department for Operational Work and Risk Analysis. This department is responsible for controlling the state border, preventing illegal crossings, detecting smugglers, and ultimately preventing smuggling.

The Customs Administration also plays an important role in detecting illegal crossings of state borders, while the support that the state authorities of Montenegro receive through international cooperation, especially from Frontex, is of particular importance.

The prosecution of perpetrators of crimes related to human trafficking and smuggling of migrants is carried out by the State Prosecutor's Office, while criminal proceedings are conducted before the competent courts.



LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

Legal instruments in Montenegro in the fight against migrant smuggling include national legislation, international conventions and protocols, as well as EU directives.

As for the national legislation, the Criminal Code of Montenegro, in Article 405, prescribes the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons. This offence is committed by whoever, without the required permission, crosses or attempts to cross the state border of Montenegro, under arms or by means of force. Paragraph 2 of the same article stipulates that a criminal offense is committed by someone who is engaged in the illegal transfer of other persons across the border of Montenegro, or who enables another person to acquire a financial or other benefit, to illegally cross the border, or to illegally stay or transit. The qualifying form of this criminal offense is provided by paragraph 3 of the same article if the offense is committed by several persons in an organised manner, through abuse of one's office, or in a manner that endangers the life or health of persons whose illegal border crossing, stay, or transit is enabled, or where a large number of people are being smuggled.

In the process of preventing the smuggling of migrants, the Law on Foreigners is also important, as it regulates the entry, stay, and movement of foreigners and measures against illegal migration. In addition, the Law on International and Temporary Protection of Foreigners regulates the procedure for asylum and protection of migrants,

The most important procedural law is the Criminal Procedure Code, which prescribes the course of proceedings from the filing of a criminal complaint to the Issuance of a final judgment, and also regulates the powers of the state prosecutor's office and the police. Equally important is the Law on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, which enables cooperation with other countries.



JUDICIAL FRAMEWORK

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The role of the state prosecutor in cases of human trafficking and migrant smuggling is crucial, since the state prosecutor conducts the investigations, issues binding orders to the police, and ultimately files indictments. The most important tools available to the state prosecutor are special investigative measures, such as the application of secret surveillance measures with court approval, searches of persons, apartments, and other premises, electronic devices, mobile phones, and similar, as well as forensic processing of evidence, etc. The prosecutor has the possibility of cooperation and data exchange with international organizations, and, when necessary, the formation of joint investigation teams.

In addition, the state prosecutor may initiate financial investigations against smugglers. Migrant smugglers are often connected with other criminal activities, most frequently with the commission of the criminal offence of human trafficking, because migrants are at real risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, most often victims of labor exploitation, and sometimes sexual exploitation. These cases often involve organized crime, and in the region, there have also been kidnappings of migrants carried out by armed groups of migrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan, who abuse the kidnapped migrants and blackmail their families to extort money from them. Smuggling of migrants can also be linked with criminal offences such as counterfeiting of documents, unlawful possession and carrying of weapons and explosive substances, etc.

During 2024, five judgments were handed down in Montenegro for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code. Based on the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica, one person was sentenced to a prison sentence of two years, with security measures of vehicle confiscation and expulsion of a foreign national from the country. Also, on the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica, one person was imposed a suspended sentence, with the security measure of vehicle confiscation. Furthermore, on the bill of indictment in the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Herceg Novi, the court delivered a judgment against two persons: one person was sentenced to 5 months of imprisonment, while the other person was sentenced to 3 months. However, after an appeal, the High Court in Podgorica reversed the judgment for the second person and imposed a suspended sentence. Additionally, on the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Herceg Novi, the Court sentenced one person to a prison sentence of one year. Finally, on the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Kotor, the Court issued a judgment against one person and sentenced him to 6 months of imprisonment, with a two-year probation term, and with the security measure of vehicle confiscation.

During 2025, 6 judgments were handed down in Montenegro for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code. Based on the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Plav, one person was sentenced to one year of imprisonment. On the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Pljevlja, one person was given a suspended sentence and was imposed a prison sentence of 6 months, with a two-year probation term, and a security measure of vehicle confiscation. Also, according to the bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica, one person was given a suspended sentence and was imposed a prison sentence of 6 months with a two-year probation term, while according to the other bill of indictment of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica, the court issued a judgment sentencing one

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person to prison. Furthermore, according to the indictment proposal of the Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Bijelo Polje, the court issued a judgment against two persons: one person was sentenced to a prison sentence of 4 months, and the other to a prison sentence of 2 months, to be served in residential premises. Finally, based on the indictment of the Special State Prosecutor's Office, the court rendered a judgment against one person and sentenced him to two years in prison, imposed a fine of EUR 5,000.00.



INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The international aspect of cooperation is extremely important for combating migrant smuggling in Montenegro, bearing in mind that Montenegro is a transit country on the migrant route, and that migrants enter Montenegro from third countries with the ultimate goal of moving on to the European Union countries.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the cooperation between the border police of Montenegro and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Thanks to the projects, trainings, study visits, and joint operations organized by Frontex, our border police system has developed over the last 15 years.

In May 2023, a new Agreement was signed between Montenegro and the European Union on operational activities carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in Montenegro, aligned with the new EU regulations. The agreement enabled the organization of joint operations and the deployment of Frontex teams in Montenegro, who now, together with border police officers, perform border control tasks with the possibility of applying executive powers. An integral part of the operation is the continuous electronic monitoring of the Adriatic Sea with multi-sensor aerial observation from aircraft, and more recently, of Lake Skadar, as well as land observation using the specialized Frontex MSS vehicle. A contingent of Frontex field patrol vehicles, type Ford Raptor, has also been delivered for state border surveillance, thereby strengthening the operational capabilities and additionally saving local resources.

Assistance in the identification and registration of migrants is of particular importance for the work of the Border Police Sector, during which Frontex officers provide crucial support in processing individuals and collecting data on movement routes, contacts, smuggling networks, as well as identifying persons of potential risk - smugglers, foreign fighters, and individuals associated with terrorism. As can be observed, the new Status Agreement has enabled partnership work in line with the best European standards and the acquisition of new knowledge, which significantly enhances the security situation in Montenegro.

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Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the Border Police Sector coordinates EMPACT activities related to migrant smuggling on behalf of the Police Administration, in accordance with the decision of the Bureau for Operational Coordination.

Within the Border Police Sector, Europol's Secure Information Exchange Network Application-SIENA - was established. This enables direct exchange of information with regional and international partners. Typically, these are data on individuals, travel document details, travel routes, vehicles used, phone numbers, and similar. Biometric data is also exchanged.

The signing of the Convention on Police Cooperation in Southeast Europe represented the foundation for the development of operational police cooperation.

In the exchange of statistical data on migration, FRONTEX, IOM, EU liaison officers, and liaison officers from individual embassies of European countries play a significant role.

In recent years, with the development of joint centers for police cooperation, a system of information exchange has been established. Montenegro participates in the work of the Joint Center in Trebinje, between Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, as well as the Joint Center in Plav, between Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo.



RELEVANT CASES

Concerning the cases prosecuted before the Montenegrin judiciary related to the smuggling of migrants, one notable case was conducted before the Basic Court in Pljevlja and concluded with a conviction. The perpetrator committed a criminal offense by transporting migrants as a taxi driver. This judgment marked a shift from previous practice, since in the earlier period there had been several acquittals for perpetrators who committed the offence in this manner.

Another important case for Montenegrin practice was opened before the Special State Prosecutor's Office, in which an indictment was filed against 13 persons; 8 persons the criminal offense of creating a criminal organization under Article 401a of the Criminal Code of Montenegro and the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro, and against 5 people for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code of the Code of Montenegro. The indictment was confirmed by the decision of the High Court in Podgorica, and against one person from this case, the High Court in Podgorica rendered a judgment declaring that person guilty of the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro and sentenced to a prison sentence of two years and a fine in the amount of 5,000.00 euros.

During 2024, in Montenegro, for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro, 2 orders were issued to conduct investigations against 16 persons (9 of them for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code

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of Montenegro and the creation of a criminal organization under Article 401a of the Criminal Code of Montenegro). At the same time, 12 cases against 13 persons were in the preliminary investigation phase. One direct indictment was brought against one person, 4 bills of indictments were filed against 5 persons, and one financial investigation was initiated against 13 persons.

During 2025, in the Special State Prosecutor's Office and basic state prosecutor's offices in Montenegro, for the same criminal offense under Article 405 of the Criminal Code, two orders were issued to conduct investigations against 3 persons, while in 12 cases, preliminary investigations were conducted against 16 persons.

Furthermore, 2 indictments were brought against 15 persons, namely: 1 indictment against 2 persons for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro and 1 indictment against 13 persons for the criminal offense of illegal crossing of the state border and smuggling of persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro and the criminal offense of creating a criminal organization from Article 401a of the Criminal Code of Montenegro (and against 8 persons for the criminal offense under Article 405 and 401a of the CC and 5 persons for the criminal offense under Article 405 of the CC). In addition, 5 indictments were filed against 5 persons.

In 2024, one order was issued to initiate a financial investigation against 13 persons for the criminal offense of illegal border crossing and smuggling persons under Article 405 of the Criminal Code and the criminal offense of creating a criminal organization under Article 401a of the Criminal Code of Montenegro. During 2025, however, there were no orders to conduct a financial investigation for the criminal offense of illegal border crossing and people smuggling under Article 405 of the Criminal Code.