



# IRREGULAR IMMIGRATION IN CROATIA

Inkubatoru Izvrsnosti (Zagreb)

Sponsored by





Sponsored by



# Index

---

	page
Figures on irregular immigration	
• Figure 1	3
• Figure 2	4
1. The reality faced by irregular migrants in Croatia	5
2. Irregular migrants pose challenges between neighbors	6
3. The approach of the Croatian Government to irregular migration	6
4. References	9

## Figures on irregular immigration

Croatia is not a country accustomed to receiving immigration. Despite the increasing arrival of immigrants to the Republic over the last decade, until 2022, Croatia's migration balance was negative,<sup>1</sup> indicating a loss in population. However, this trend is changing. Nonetheless, the proportion of the migrant population remains very low.<sup>2</sup>

When Croatia joined the European Union in 2013 the country became the gateway to the European Union for the Western Balkans, particularly through its borders with Serbia and, Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2018.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, since it acceded to the Schengen area in January 2023,<sup>4</sup> it has become a Schengen gateway too. The adherence to the Schengen Agreement entailed the immediate abolition of internal land and sea border controls between Croatia and other Schengen countries, as well as air border controls, effective March 26th, 2023.<sup>5</sup>

The Western Balkan route stands as one of the main entry routes for irregular migrants into the European Union. In 2023, irregular crossings via this route constituted just over a quarter (26%) of all irregular crossings into the EU.<sup>6</sup>

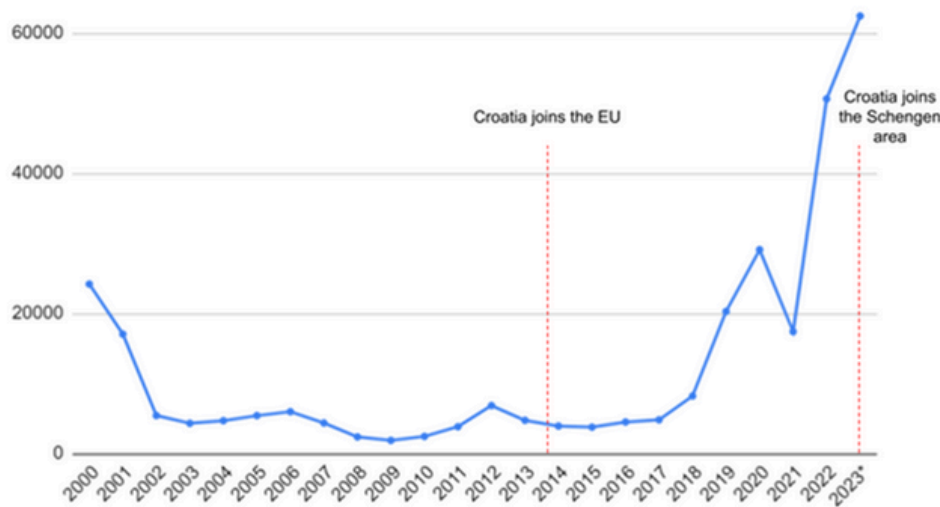
Figure 1. Irregular border crossings over the European routes

Route	Annual data 2023	Percentage over the total in 2023	Change from 2022
Central Mediterranean	157.479	41%	0,49
Western Balkans	99.068	26%	-31%
Eastern Mediterranean	60.073	16%	0,55
Western Africa	40.403	11%	1,61
Western Mediterranean	16.915	4%	0,12
Eastern Land Border	5.608	1%	-12%
Total	379.546	100%	

Source: Frontex

Regarding the arrival of irregular migrants at the Croatian border, official data published by the Ministry of Interior shows a sustained increase in recent years, with two peaks in 2020 and 2023 (see Figure 2). However, detailed information is only available for the last year, due to the publication of a report commissioned by the Croatian government to analyze the impact of Croatia's<sup>7</sup> accession to the Schengen area.

Figure 2. Irregular border crossings over the Croatian border (2000-2023).



Source: Ministry of Interior<sup>8</sup>

According to this report,<sup>9</sup> in the first 10 months of 2023 (January 1 to October 31), a total of 62,452 irregular crossings occurred in Croatia, representing a 73.2% increase compared to the same period the previous year. The majority of irregular arrivals to the Republic originated from Afghanistan and Turkey, consistent with the irregular immigration patterns observed in Western Balkan countries. Additionally, there were smaller numbers from Morocco, Pakistan, Iraq, and Bangladesh. However, from September onwards, there was a decline in irregular migrant arrivals, which continued into October.

Among regions, there has been a sharp increase in arrivals in the area of the Police Administration of Karlovac (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023).

The number of people seeking international protection has also risen. In the first 10 months of 2023, there were nearly five times as many applications as in the entire previous year (60,440 compared to 12,872). According to the data provided by the Croatian government, the vast majority of the asylum seekers (97%) do not remain in Croatia, which shows that the country is more of a transit country than a destination for irregular migrants. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023)

Following Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area, the government of Slovenia has warned of an increase in the entry of irregular immigrants to its country through Croatia. Specifically, as reported by the European Travel Information and Authorization System,<sup>10</sup> a total of 58,193 individuals in irregular situations would have entered Slovenia from Croatia throughout the year 2023. This represents an 84% increase compared to the previous year. This trend supports the idea that Croatia is more of a transit country for irregular migration.

## 1. The reality faced by irregular migrants in Croatia

The absence of proper documentation and permits characterizing irregular immigration makes individuals more vulnerable to becoming victims of mafias, human trafficking, and exploitation. According to EUROPOL, the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia was the second most used for smugglers in the Western Balkan route in 2023. More specifically, the last analysis published by the Croatian government showed that in the first 10 months of 2023, 1,103 smugglers were detected, and 198 crimes of assisting illegal entry into the country were recorded. This marks an increase of 49% and 64.14%, respectively, compared to the same period of the previous year (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023).<sup>12</sup> Smuggling has increased in Karlovac region.

Not only has the number of detected traffickers increased, but this criminal practice also appears to be more prevalent among nationals of other countries than among Croatians. According to the Government of the Republic of Croatia (2023), out of all the individuals arrested in the first 10 months of 2023 on charges of human smuggling, 70% were of foreign origin.

After Croatia officially became a candidate for the Schengen area (2016), irregular immigrants began to be victims of border rejections. The most paradigmatic case, finally judged by the European Court of Human Rights, was that of an Afghan girl who was pushed and run over by a train on her way back (M.H. et al. v. Croatia).

Finally, concerning integration, the Croatian government has acknowledged that although immigrants' presence does not significantly contribute to crimes against public order, peace, or property, their mere existence often fosters a sense of insecurity and fear (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023). This situation proves counterproductive for any attempt to integrate such individuals. Addressing this is a significant challenge. Even more so, considering that the measures and integration projects in the country, such as those outlined in the Action Plan for the Integration of Applicants for International Protection and Persons Granted International Protection, are aimed at individuals who have been granted international protection (i.e., refugees, asylum seekers). Additionally, institutions such as the Croatian Law Centre have pointed out delays and gaps in their implementation and a lack of emphasis on aspects such as knowledge of the language and culture of the country.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Irregular migrants pose challenges between neighbours

As a gateway to the EU and the Schengen area for the Western Balkan countries, Croatia faces significant challenges with its neighboring countries, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina. Irregular migrant arrivals to Bosnia-Herzegovina have been steadily increasing since the beginning of 2023, reaching the highest levels since 2019.<sup>14</sup> This surge in arrivals may indicate a shift in migration routes, with less pressure on Hungary but more on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One of the primary issues Croatia encounters with Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as with Serbia, is the disparity in visa policies. The visa-free regimes implemented by the Western Balkan countries towards certain nations, which pose a migration risk, are not harmonized with the visa policy of the European Union. For instance, Serbia has a visa-free regime with 16 countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina with 8, and Montenegro with 11. This discrepancy has created additional pressure on these countries, posing a significant challenge to the effective management of illegal migration in the region. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023) For that reason, Croatia has been demanding an alignment of Western Balkans visa regimes and the visa regimes of the EU.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, the existence of illegal migrant and refugee camps along the Bosnian and Serbian borders with Croatia makes irregular crossing control even more difficult. Recently two camps were dismantled in Donji Svilaj.<sup>16</sup>

## 3. The approach of the Croatian Government to irregular migration

One of the primary mechanisms for migration control employed by the Republic of Croatia is the readmission of individuals who enter the country without the requisite permits for residency. Croatia has established bilateral agreements with Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 2002 and 2011) and Serbia (since 2009)<sup>17</sup> for this purpose. These agreements remain in effect despite Croatia's accession to the Schengen area.

According to data from the Government of the Republic of Croatia (2023), Bosnia received 11,285 applications for immigrant readmission within the initial 10 months of last year, but only 2,279 of them were accepted. In contrast, Serbia received a considerably lower number of applications, with only 663 submitted, out of which only 290 were approved.

After 2016, Croatia was involved in several media-highlighted cases of border rejections,<sup>18</sup> such as the one brought before the European Court of Human Rights<sup>19</sup> (M.H. et al. v. Croatia). Since then, approximately 10 criminal complaints have been filed in Croatia for pushback-related offenses, mostly initiated by the Croatian Center for Peace Studies. However, none of these complaints have resulted in criminal charges, as the majority are stalled in the pre-investigation phase, have exceeded legally stipulated procedural deadlines, or have been rejected due to the absence of reasonable suspicion of a criminal offense or the lack of documentation. (Fehr and Alpes, 2024)

Croatia has also been the target of border restrictions from EU and Schengen members like Slovenia. Slovenia In October 2023, Slovenia decided to reintroduce border controls with Croatia and Hungary, despite both being members of the EU and Schengen. They planned to be in place until June.<sup>20</sup> However, this does not appear to pose a problem in their neighboring relationship. In November 2023, in a meeting between Interior ministers, Italy, Croatia and Slovenia decided to strengthen border control by launching joint border patrols, setting up a joint coordination center, and holding regular trilateral meetings to exchange key information.<sup>21</sup> Since then, the police chiefs of the three countries have met both among themselves and with the police chiefs of the Western Balkan countries.<sup>22</sup>

Before Croatia acceded to the Schengen area, Croatia cooperated with Frontex joint operations focused on combating the smuggling of migrants and other illegal activities like drug trafficking. Since its launch in 2022, Croatia also participates in the Joint Reintegration Services, the support that Frontex offers for the return of immigrants to their countries of origin. Frontex also provides training for the Croatian border and customs officers.<sup>23</sup>

Croatia has also been able to access EU funds to manage migration. Between 2015 and 2020 (both years included), the country received 163,13 million euros from two of the EU funds: the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and the Internal Security Fund.<sup>24</sup> These funds have been allocated to programs dedicated to strengthening external border management concerning the irregular mass arrival of third-country nationals, among other aspects.

Croatia's accession to the Schengen area has also led to reinforce control at border crossings, aimed at detecting and apprehending smugglers. In this regard, during the first 10 months of 2023, the Croatian police checked 156,997 vehicles and 251,430 persons. These checks revealed 24,968 migrants who had return orders or who had previously expressed their intention to seek international protection, as well as 479 persons against whom criminal proceedings have been initiated for human trafficking. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2023)



Sponsored by



Furthermore, to alleviate the pressure on police offices, which are where irregular immigrants detected in the country are registered and processed, the Croatian government is constructing a new immigrant registration center in a former military facility located in Dugi Dol (a city situated 20 kilometers east of Karlovac) (Tesija, 2023).



- 1: The data is available on the website of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics: <https://podaci.dzs.hr/2023/en/58062>
- 2: Eurostat data shows that only 4% of the Croatian population is non-Croatian.
- 3: Oruc, Nermin; Raza, Saima and Santic, Danica. (2020). The Western Balkan Migration Route (2015-2019). Prague Process Secretariat. Available at: <https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/resources/repository/33-reports/289-the-western-balkan-migration-route-2015-2019/download>
- 4: For further information, you can access the press release published by the Croatian government: <https://mvep.gov.hr/news-and-announcements-94102/euro-and-schengen-croatia-joins-the-euro-and-schengen-areas/253035>
- 5: European Migration Network. (2023). Croatia. EMN Country Factsheet 2022. Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9c6cd903-66a9-402c-a5d1-2fd970553628\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9c6cd903-66a9-402c-a5d1-2fd970553628_en)
- 6: Data available at Frontex website. Here: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/> and here: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/significant-rise-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-2023-highest-since-2016-C0gGpm>
- 7: Data can be found in several reports:
  1. <https://mup.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/OTVORENI%20PODACI/Arma%20%202021%20final.pdf>
  2. [https://mup.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/statistika/2023/Statisticki\\_pregled\\_2022\\_web%20prelim.pdf](https://mup.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/statistika/2023/Statisticki_pregled_2022_web%20prelim.pdf)
  3. <https://sabor.hr/izvjesce-o-stanju-ilegalnih-migracija-na-podrucju-republike-hrvatske-za-razdoblje-od-ulaska?t=142191&tid=212261>
- 8: Ministry of Interior. (2022). Annual report for 2021 on migration and asylum in the Republic of Croatia. Zagreb: Ministry of Interior. Available at: <https://mup.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/OTVORENI%20PODACI/Arma%20%202021%20final.pdf>
- 9: Government of the Republic of Croatia. (2023). Report on the situation of illegal immigration in the territory of the Republic of Croatia since the Republic of Croatia's entry into the Schengen area. Croatian Parliament. Available at: <https://sabor.hr/izvjesce-o-stanju-ilegalnih-migracija-na-podrucju-republike-hrvatske-za-razdoblje-od-ulaska?t=142191&tid=212261>
- 10: Data is available at the website of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System: <https://etias.com/articles/slovenia-migration-surge-post-croatia-schengen>
- 11: UROPOL. (8th March, 2024). 19 smugglers arrested in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. EUROPOL. Available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/19-smugglers-arrested-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-croatia>
- 12: Tesija, Vuk. (November 24, 2023). On Migrant Route through Croatia, More Police and More Foreign Smugglers. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/24/on-migrant-route-through-croatia-more-police-and-more-foreign-smugglers/>
- 13: Croatian Law Centre. (June 26, 2023). Country Report: Content of International Protection. Asylum in Europe. Available at: [https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/croatia/content-international-protection/#\\_ftn3](https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/croatia/content-international-protection/#_ftn3)

- 14: OM. (2024). DTM Europe: Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) (January - December 2023) - Yearly Regional Report. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/europe-mixed-migration-flows-europe-yearly-overview-2023>
- 15: Government of the Republic of Croatia (March 22, 2024). Western Balkan countries should align their visa policies with the EU's. The Government of the Republic of Croatia. Available at: <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/bozinovic-western-balkan-countries-should-align-their-visa-policies-with-eu-s/42180>
- 16: Lozancic, Branco. (December 8, 2023). Police in Bosnia and Herzegovina discover two illegal camps of armed migrants. Glas Hrvatske. Available at: <https://glashrvatske.hrt.hr/en/foreign/police-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-discover-two-illegal-camps-of-armed-migrants-11187657>
- 17: European Migration Network. (2022). Bilateral Readmission Agreements. Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/EMN\\_INFORM\\_bilateral\\_readmission.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/EMN_INFORM_bilateral_readmission.pdf)
- 18: European Migration Network. (2022). Bilateral Readmission Agreements. Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/EMN\\_INFORM\\_bilateral\\_readmission.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/EMN_INFORM_bilateral_readmission.pdf)
- 19: Fehr, Irina and Alpes, Jill. (April 8, 2024). Pushing states to evidence pushbacks: Lessons from MH v. Croatia for intersecting domestic criminal law and international human rights. Faculty of Law Blogs - Oxford University. Available at: <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2024/04/pushing-states-evidence-pushbacks-lessons-mh-v-croatia>
- 20: Wallis, Emma. (January 19, 2024). Migrant 'handling facilities' planned at Slovenia-Croatia border. InfoMigrants. Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/54643/migrant-handling-facilities-planned-at-sloveniacroatia-border>
- 21: Ministry of the Interior. (November 2, 2023). Minister Poklukar stresses the importance of enhanced cooperation in Trieste. Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2023-11-02-minister-poklukar-stresses-the-importance-of-enhanced-cooperation-in-trieste/>
- 22: Ministry of the Interior. (January 1, 2024). Migration: Slovenian, Italian and Croatian interior ministers to step up cooperation. Republic of Slovenia. Available at: <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2024-01-16-migration-slovenian-italian-and-croatian-interior-ministers-to-step-up-cooperation/>
- 23: Read more at: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-boosts-firearm-detection-skills-in-the-western-balkans-bMEYkq>
- 24: European Commission. (2021). Managing Migration. EU Financial Support to Croatia. Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/202101\\_managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-croatia\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/202101_managing-migration-eu-financial-support-to-croatia_en.pdf)



Sponsored by

