

Policy Dossier on the Western Balkan Route

Statistical measurement gaps, secondary movements and the digital transformation of migrant smuggling in a pre-investigative policy framework

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ABSTRACT

This policy document examines the evolving dynamics of the Western Balkan route through the lens of statistical measurement gaps, secondary movements and the digital transformation of migrant smuggling. While recent Frontex data indicate a significant decrease in detected irregular border crossings at EU external borders, national figures from Slovenia suggest a parallel increase in unauthorised entries along the Croatian-Slovenian segment. This apparent contradiction highlights a key methodological issue: detection statistics capture recorded events, but do not necessarily reflect hidden flows, undetected crossings or adaptive route displacement. Particular attention is given to the sharp rise in Sudanese nationals recorded in Slovenia, which may indicate inter-route compensation and the diversification of smuggling logistics through hybrid air-land models. The document also explores the role of digital platforms, messaging applications, geolocation tools and informal payment systems as enabling infrastructures for smuggling networks, while stressing that their use does not automatically constitute evidence of criminal conduct. The proposed response is a proportionate pre-investigative triage model based on scenario awareness, lawful data minimisation, multi-sensor indicators, public-private cooperation and victim-centred referrals. The overall aim is to support competent authorities in distinguishing analytical indicators from evidentiary findings, while strengthening early warning capacity, protection safeguards and policy coordination.

Executive summary

This dossier identifies a methodological mismatch between European statistics on detections at external borders and the dynamics observable along the terminal segments of the Western Balkan route. The decrease in EU-level detections reported by Frontex in the first months of 2026 cannot be automatically interpreted as an equivalent decrease in migratory pressure or in the operational capacity of smuggling networks. It primarily measures detected events at specific border points, not the full universe of secondary movements, undetected crossings and adaptive land routes.

The Slovenian Police recorded 8,767 unauthorised entries between 1 January and 30 April 2026, compared with 5,780 in the comparable period indicated in the 2026 report, an increase of approximately 51.7%. The phenomenon is concentrated at the Croatian-Slovenian border and within the jurisdiction of Novo Mesto, confirming the relevance of wooded border corridors and dispersed frontier areas as high-opacity transit spaces.

The Sudanese nationality pattern is particularly relevant as an indicator of inter-route compensation: the Sudanese component recorded in Slovenia rose from residual values in 2025 to more than one thousand cases in the first four months of 2026. In policy terms, this suggests that the decline in sea arrivals in Italy does not necessarily coincide with a reduction in overall irregular movements, but may reflect logistical diversification towards air, land and hybrid vectors. The digital dimension should not be framed deterministically. Peer-to-peer platforms, Telegram channels, maps, messaging applications, hawala systems and informal payment tools do not by themselves prove the existence of a crime. They may, however, act as enabling infrastructures for advertising, recruitment, remote guidance, exchange of coordinates, payment, extortion and possible conversion from transactional smuggling into coercive trafficking.

The recommended response is not an indiscriminate expansion of data collection. It is a scenario-awareness and pre-investigative triage model: proportionate indicators, data minimisation, separation between strategic analysis and criminal investigation, referral to competent authorities, victim protection and auditable chains of information handling.

Key findings

Dimension	Data / indicator	Policy implication
EU statistics	Frontex reports an approximately 40% year-on-year decrease in EU detections in the first four/five months of 2026.	Detection figures do not automatically measure the hidden population of undetected crossings or secondary movements.
Slovenia	8,767 unauthorised entries between 1 January and 30 April 2026; 8,138 from the Croatian border.	The Croatian-Slovenian bottleneck remains a privileged sensor for the land route.

Dimension	Data / indicator	Policy implication
Sudan	1,006 Sudanese nationals recorded in the first four months of 2026 by the Slovenian Police.	Possible diversification from maritime routes towards air-land and hybrid models.
Digital layer	Use of social media, apps, maps, messaging systems and informal transfer channels.	Responsible OSINT, preservation and triage are required, not indiscriminate mass collection.
Trafficking risk	Debt, route blockage, violence, coercion and exploitation may emerge after transit failure.	Anti-smuggling policies should systematically integrate THB indicators and victim-centred referrals.

1. Policy problem and analytical question

The Western Balkan route cannot be read merely as a geographical sequence of irregular crossings. It is an adaptive logistical system in which border controls, readmission policies, reception capacity, smuggler strategies, digital communications and migrant expectations interact in real time. The core policy problem is therefore to distinguish three levels: detected flows, estimated flows and hidden flows.

The central analytical question is whether the decline in institutional detections at certain borders indicates a substantive reduction in transits, or rather a displacement of routes towards less visible segments. This dossier treats the latter as a plausible scenario, not as a definitive conclusion. It therefore proposes a reading based on converging indicators rather than isolated statistical series.

From an academic perspective, the issue is methodological: detection statistics are administrative measurements produced by a control apparatus. They are indispensable, but they do not coincide with the overall phenomenon. In particular, when criminal networks modify routes, timing, vectors and communication tools, detection data may decrease precisely while the illicit market becomes more professionalised.

2. The statistical paradox: falling EU detections and rising Slovenian figures

In May and June 2026, Frontex reported an approximately 40% reduction in irregular border crossings detected at the external borders of the European Union for the January-April and January-May periods. This is an important figure, but it must be treated as a measure of detected events, not as a comprehensive proxy for irregular mobility.

The Slovenian Police documentation for the period 1 January-30 April 2026 points in a different direction: 8,767 unauthorised entries, compared with 5,780 for the comparable period indicated in the 2026 report. The border with Croatia accounts for 8,138 cases, or 92.8% of the total, while the Novo Mesto Police Directorate handled 74.4% of all unauthorised entries. These figures support the hypothesis that the Croatian-Slovenian segment functions as a statistical emergence area for movements that may have remained invisible in earlier stages of the route.

This paradox does not mean that Frontex is “wrong” or that the Slovenian Police are the only reliable sensor. Rather, the two sources measure partially different objects. Frontex records aggregate detections at external borders and along defined routes; the Slovenian Police measure irregular entries detected on national territory, including secondary movements and crossings from a neighbouring Schengen State. Public policy must therefore avoid simplified comparisons and adopt a multi-sensor reading.

Recent local reporting¹ from the Italian-Slovenian border further supports the view that official interception figures capture only a partial picture of cross-border mobility. According to two reports published by *Il Piccolo* on 15 June 2026, the border area between Friuli Venezia Giulia and Slovenia includes a dense network of secondary crossings, agricultural passages, forest tracks, cycling routes and minor roads that cannot be permanently monitored by fixed police or military deployments. In the province of Trieste, only the main crossing points are subject to structured controls, while dozens of minor passages remain uncovered or are monitored only through mobile patrols. A similar situation is described in the Gorizia area, where the border is characterised by “white roads”, rural paths, cycle lanes and informal passageways embedded in a highly porous cross-border landscape.

This evidence does not in itself quantify the number of undetected migrants, but it is highly relevant from a methodological perspective. It shows that the physical geography of the Italian Slovenian frontier creates multiple opportunities for low-visibility movement outside formal checkpoints. Detection-based statistics therefore risk underestimating the real intensity of secondary movements when they rely primarily on persons stopped at fixed crossings, recorded during structured patrols, or intercepted after visible incidents. The existence of numerous unguarded or only intermittently monitored access points reinforces the need to combine official detections with field reporting, local-police observations, geospatial analysis and risk-based monitoring of secondary routes.

¹ Valeria Pace and Maria Elena Pattaro, “Viaggio ai valichi secondari dove il presidio fisso non c’è,” *Il Piccolo*, 15 June 2026; Marco Bisiach, “Tra bivi, bianche di migranti e ciclovie nel Goriziano,” *Il Piccolo*, 15 June 2026.



3. Croatia and Slovenia as a transit space: avoidance, asylum and secondary movements

Croatia's role should be analysed with caution. Entry into the Schengen area does not eliminate Croatia's function as a transit segment; it may instead shift pressure from the external border to the internal Croatian-Slovenian border. AIDA/ECRE sources indicate that in 2024, despite a decrease in complaints, several non-governmental organisations continued to report pushback practices and problems with effective access to territory and procedure.

The analysis of the "Croatian Corridor" provides further analytical elements on instant transits and asylum avoidance. Field documentation reveals that the Republic of Croatia, although fully integrated into the Schengen area, operates in practice as a highly permeable transit axis. Croatian institutional data on international protection reflect a major anomaly: according to Deutsche Welle², citing the Croatian Ministry of the Interior, 26,534 illegal border crossings were registered in Croatia in the first ten months of 2024, while only 3.6% of those who expressed a need for international protection formally submitted an asylum application in Croatia.

From the perspective of migrants, the decision not to immediately lodge an asylum application may depend on multiple factors: fear of informal returns, mistrust of authorities, the wish to reach already established communities, instructions received from facilitators, misinformation about procedures or expectations linked to other Member States. For this reason, the number of protection applications in a transit country is not necessarily proportional to the number of persons crossing it.

² "Nevidljivi migranti u Hrvatskoj: Od 26.000 izbjeglica, azil zatražilo tek 4 posto", 11-12-2024

The policy consequence is twofold. First, secondary movements should be measured through territorial indicators, not only through border indicators. Secondly, anti-smuggling action cannot be detached from protection. If migrants perceive interaction with authorities as risky or useless, their dependence on passeurs increases, and so does the possibility that a transactional relationship degenerates into debt, coercion and exploitation.

4. Inter-route compensation dynamics and the Sudan case

Italian figures on sea arrivals as of 31 May 2026 indicate 11,471 arrivals, compared with 22,971 in the corresponding period of 2025. The decrease is significant and is consistent with the Frontex picture. However, read together with the Slovenian data, it does not support a linear conclusion that the overall irregular migration phenomenon is decreasing.

The Sudanese figure is particularly relevant. In the Slovenian report for January-April 2026, Sudanese nationals reached 1,006; in the nationality comparison, the same category stood at 4 in the comparable period represented in the 2026 report. This variation should not be interpreted automatically as proof of a single organised route, but as a strong signal of logistical reconfiguration requiring further investigation.

The notion of hybrid smuggling is useful to describe this reconfiguration: part of the journey may take place through formally legal or semi-legal channels, such as commercial flights, tourist or business visas and entry into Balkan countries with visa regimes less aligned with the EU; a second phase may then be inserted into illegal land networks towards Croatia, Slovenia, north-eastern Italy, Austria or Germany. This model does not replace maritime routes; it complements and compensates for them.

5. The digital smuggling ecosystem and the risk of conversion into trafficking

The digitalisation of migrant smuggling does not mean that the entire criminal cycle takes place online. It means that essential functions - advertising, contact, reputation, guidance, coordinates, payment, threat and control - can be distributed across ordinary platforms and encrypted channels. The policy error would be to treat every use of Telegram, WhatsApp, Signal, maps or informal payments as proof of a crime; the opposite error would be to ignore the enabling role of such tools.

Europol analyses on migrant smuggling and UNODC reports on trafficking confirm that organised crime, technology and migrant vulnerability interact increasingly closely. In pre-investigative terms, the value does not lie in massive digital collection, but in the ability to preserve relevant content, assign a reliability level to the source, distinguish observed facts from inference, and transmit only relevant inputs to competent authorities.

The risk of conversion from smuggling to trafficking emerges when migrants lose bargaining capacity: depletion of resources, debt towards the organisation, document retention, violence, blockage in Serbian or Bosnian hubs, linguistic isolation, dependence on the passeur, or threats against family members. In such cases the originally transactional relationship may turn into labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced begging, domestic servitude or other forms of coercion.

For this reason, the dossier recommends systematically integrating THB indicators into anti-smuggling analysis: recruitment, transport, exploitation, control and profit should be treated as distinct but connected domains. The aim is not to anticipate criminal findings, but to recognise risk signals requiring protection, referral or investigative validation.

6. Institutional policy implications and Schengen border controls

The persistence of temporary internal border controls within the Schengen area confirms that Member States continue to perceive the Balkan segment as a factor affecting internal security and migration management. The European Commission recalls that the reintroduction of internal border controls is a measure of last resort, limited to exceptional situations and subject to necessity and proportionality.

Notifications and extensions of border controls do not by themselves prove an increase in flows; they do indicate, however, that the issue is not merely statistical. It concerns the ability of States to connect border management, asylum, criminal intelligence, judicial cooperation, victim protection and reception policies. When these components remain separated, criminal networks exploit the gaps between systems.

European policy should therefore move beyond the dichotomy between security and protection. A purely security-based response may push migrants towards more expensive and dangerous routes; a purely humanitarian response may fail to affect the criminal structures organising the market. The point of balance is traceable, proportionate, indicator-led inter-agency cooperation.

7. Operational response model: indicators, triage and public-private cooperation

This dossier proposes a five-step model. First: lawful and minimised collection by authorised public and private actors, including OSINT analysts, field operators, NGOs, social services, local authorities and technical actors. Secondly: classification of the input by source, content, data category, urgency, victim risk and confidence level. Thirdly: triage by a competent public unit. Fourthly: controlled escalation only where national thresholds allow. Fifthly: feedback and updating of indicators.

Public-private cooperation must not turn civil actors into auxiliary police. Private actors may generate red flags, preserve public material, describe patterns, report risks and provide technical expertise. Public authorities retain exclusive responsibility for validation, investigation, coercive measures, formal exchange with Europol/Eurojust and evidentiary use.

The model is consistent with the standards set by the Berkeley Protocol and by the Eurojust/ICC guidelines for civil society organisations: do no harm, informed consent where appropriate, protection of vulnerable persons, confidentiality, chain of custody, separation between fact and inference, secure storage and traceability of information handling. These standards are essential where the boundary between protection, analysis and investigation is thin.

8. Policy recommendations

1. Establish a multi-sensor matrix for the Western Balkan route, integrating Frontex, national police forces, asylum data, reception capacity, NGOs, verified OSINT, financial indicators and local reports.
2. Statistically separate detections, estimates of hidden flows and secondary movements. Every report should explicitly state what it measures and what it does not measure.
3. Create a common pre-investigative input template: source, date, location, observed content, preserved material, associated indicators, confidence level, victim risk, legal basis for processing and proposed action.
4. Integrate THB indicators into all anti-smuggling analyses. Any signal of debt, coercion, threat, document retention, violence or exploitation should trigger a victim-centred assessment.
5. Strengthen cooperation with Europol and Eurojust within their respective mandates: Europol as support to investigations and intelligence development activated by competent authorities; Eurojust for judicial coordination and procedural channels where transnational criminal profiles emerge.
- 6.6. Avoid massive, non-purpose-limited digital collection. Digital analysis should be proportionate, documented, auditable and oriented towards the preservation of relevant content, not the construction of opaque archives.
7. Use Slovenian data as an early sensor for the Croatian-Slovenian bottleneck and compare them regularly with Italian, Croatian, Austrian and Frontex data.
8. Launch a specific focus on the Sudanese component and possible air-land routes, distinguishing logistical hypotheses, international protection needs and possible criminal networks.

9. Limits, confidence level and validation agenda

The confidence level is high for the official statistical data cited, as they come from Frontex, the Slovenian Police and the Italian Ministry of the Interior. It is medium for inferences on inter-route compensation, which require further validation through flight data, visa data, territorial detections, interviews and financial analysis. It is medium-low for more specific hypotheses concerning digital channels or prices charged by passeurs unless supported by preserved and verifiable OSINT material.

The validation agenda should include: monthly comparison between Frontex and Slovenian Police data; verification of nationality patterns; analysis of emergence points in Novo Mesto; cross-checking with international protection data in Croatia and Slovenia; qualitative sampling of victim-centred testimonies; OSINT mapping of public and semi-public channels; hawala and money-transfer indicators; and verification of any use of commercial flights to Balkan countries as a preliminary phase of land transit.

Every alert must remain an indicator, not proof. The purpose of the model is to improve scenario awareness, early warning and protection while preserving procedural safeguards, privacy, fundamental rights and the evidentiary quality of any future investigations.

Data table: main quantitative indicators

Indicator	2025 period	2026 period	Change	Source
Unauthorised entries in Slovenia	5,780	8,767	+2,987 / +51.7%	Slovenian Police, report 1 Jan-30 Apr 2026
Entries from the Croatian border into Slovenia	4,987	8,138	+3,151 / +63.2%	Slovenian Police, report 1 Jan-30 Apr 2026
Intentions to apply for international protection in Slovenia	4,864	7,905	+3,041 / +62.5%	Slovenian Police, report 1 Jan-30 Apr 2026
Sudanese nationals among unauthorised entries	4	1,006	1,002	Slovenian Police, report 1 Jan-30 Apr 2026
Sea arrivals in Italy as of 31 May	22,971	11,471	-11,500 / -50.1%	Italian Ministry of the Interior, dashboard 31 May 2026
EU detections at external borders	n.a.	approximately -40% year-on-year	Detection decrease, not hidden-flow estimate	Frontex, releases 15 May and 12 June 2026

Updated documentary sources

Sources are organised by analytical function. Institutional references are prioritised for quantitative data; academic and methodological sources are used for interpretation and procedural safeguards.

[S1] **Frontex, “Irregular border crossings into the EU down 40% in the first four months of 2026”**, 15 May 2026. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-into-the-eu-down-40-in-the-first-four-months-of-2026-MwZAin>

[S2] **Frontex, “Irregular border crossings into the EU down 40% in the first five months of 2026”**, 12 June 2026. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-irregular-border-crossings-into-the-eu-down-40-in-the-first-five-months-of-2026-h4gbBB>

[S3] **Republic of Slovenia, Police, “Nedovoljene migracije v obdobju od 1. januarja do 30. aprila 2026”**, April 2026 PDF.

<https://www.policija.si/images/stories/Statistika/MejnaProblematika/IlegalneMigracije/2026/April2026.pdf>

[S4] **Republic of Slovenia, Police, “Nedovoljene migracije na območju Republike Slovenije”** statistical page. <https://www.policija.si/o-slovenski-policiji/statistika/mejna-problematika/nedovoljene-migracije-na-obmocju-republike-slovenije>

[S5] **Italian Ministry of the Interior, Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration, “Statistical dashboard as of 31 May 2026”**.

<https://libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2026-06/Cruscotto%20statistico%20giornaliero%2031-05-2026.pdf>

[S6] **Mixed Migration Centre, “Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Europe, Q1 2026”**. <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/QMMU-2026-Q1-Europe.pdf>

[S7] **Europol, European Migrant Smuggling Centre, “9th Annual Report - 2025”**. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/european-migrant-smuggling-centre-9th-annual-report-2025>

[S8] **UNODC, “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024”**. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_BOOK.pdf

[S9] **ECRE/AIDA, “Country Report: Croatia - 2024 Update”**, August 2025. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/AIDA-HR_2024-Update.pdf

[S10] **European Commission, “Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control”**. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/schengen-area/temporary-reintroduction-border-control_en

[S11] **OHCHR / UC Berkeley Human Rights Center, “Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations”**.

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/OHCHR_BerkeleyProtocol.pdf

[S12] **Eurojust / Genocide Network / ICC Office of the Prosecutor, “Documenting International Crimes and Human Rights Violations for Accountability Purposes: Guidelines for Civil Society Organisations”**, 2022. https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2022-09/2_Eurojust_ICC_CSOs_Guidelines_2-EN.pdf

Source reliability matrix

Source	Use in the dossier	Strength	Caveat
Frontex	EU detection trends	High	Measures detections, not hidden flows
Slovenian Police	Unauthorised entries detected on Slovenian territory	High	Data subject to subsequent updates
Italian Ministry of the Interior	Sea arrivals	High	Does not measure land or secondary movements
AIDA/ECRE and MMC	Context on procedure access and the Balkan route	Medium-high	Mixed sources, with NGO/monitoring components
Europol/UNODC	Criminal and THB framework	High	Not always geographically granular at segment level
Project INTERCEPTED and field inputs	Scenario awareness and hypotheses	Variable	Requires preservation, verification and validation by competent authorities