

## POLISH-MACEDONIAN COOPERATION OF BORDER SERVICES AS AN EXAMPLE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO COMBAT THE MIGRATION CRISIS

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### Abstract

*In recent years, Europe has experienced an increased wave of migration from third countries. This phenomenon has become so intense that it has been described as a migration crisis. The article presents the problem of cooperation between the Polish Border Guard and the Police of the Republic of North Macedonia as a country particularly affected by an increased influx of illegal migrants. The weak institutionalisation of Macedonia, the ongoing disputes with Greece and the low level of economic development were the factors which made it impossible for the Republic of North Macedonia to meet the challenges related to the uncontrolled influx of migrants on its own. These factors led to the establishment of cooperation between Poland and the Republic of North Macedonia, which may serve as an example of international cooperation in the fight against the migration crisis.*

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## **Introduction**

When considering the development of the European continent, one cannot overlook the issues of increased migratory flows in recent years, a phenomenon which has made a significant contribution to the development of contemporary Europe, whether in the political, social or economic sphere. The opening of borders within the Schengen countries has enabled the free movement of persons between these countries, which in turn has contributed to the economic growth of the less developed countries of the European Union. It can be said that for many people Europe has become a desired place to live.

At the same time, the development of the continent, combined with a relatively stable international situation within European countries, have made the European Union countries also a destination for people from third countries, often less developed, experiencing poverty and conflicts. The phenomenon of illegal migration of people from third countries to Europe has become so intense in recent years that it has become known as a migration crisis. Although migrants' travel destinations are primarily highly developed Member States of the European Union, the effects of the uncontrolled influx of people from third countries are also felt in other European countries, especially those located along the largest migration routes. One such country is the Republic of North Macedonia.

Although the migration crisis itself took place in 2015, and in 2018 the number of people arriving in Europe fell significantly, the effects of this increased wave of migration are being felt by European countries to this day.

## **Migration situation in North Macedonia**

As of 12 February 2019 the Republic of Macedonia has been known as: The Republic of North Macedonia is a small country located in southern Europe, in an area through which two large migration routes cross. The total area of the country is only 25,713 km<sup>2</sup>, so it can be concluded that the whole Macedonia has a size comparable to that of one of the largest Polish

voivodeships. The state borders on four countries with border sections of the following lengths:

- a 151 km long border section with Albania,
- a 221 km long border section with Serbia,
- a 148 km long border section with Bulgaria,
- a 246 km long border section with Greece.

The fact that Macedonia shares a border with the fifth country, Kosovo, which, however, is not recognised internationally by many countries, remains disputed. If Kosovo is also taken into account (the state is recognised by both Poland and Macedonia, i.e. both countries which are the focus of this article), the border of the Republic of Macedonia with this country is 159 km long, while the border with Serbia is only 62 km long.<sup>1</sup>

It is also worth noting that the Police of the Republic of Macedonia mentions other lengths of border sections, including the border with Kosovo. These are the following:

- a 186 km long border section with Albania,
- a 102 km long border section with Serbia,
- a 172 km long border section with Bulgaria,
- a 256 km long border section with Greece,
- a 179 km long border section with Kosovo.<sup>2</sup>

In turn, the Macedonian institution National Coordination Centre for Border Management, in the document *National Integrated Border Management Development Strategy 2015 - 2019*, provides the following dimensions of individual border sections:

- a 192 km long border section with Albania,
- a 263 km long border section with Serbia and Kosovo,
- a 177 km long border section with Bulgaria,
- a 262 km long border section with Greece.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministerstw Spraw Zagranicznych Rzeczypospolitej Polski, 2018 [[https://msz.gov.pl/pl/informacje\\_konsularne/profile\\_krajow/macedonia](https://msz.gov.pl/pl/informacje_konsularne/profile_krajow/macedonia)], 11 March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ministerstvo Za Vnatrešni Raboti Republika Severna Makedonija, *Organizaciona Postavenost i Nadležnosti* <https://mvr.gov.mk/page/organizaciona-postavenost-i-nadlezhnosti>], 27 March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Government of the Republic of Macedonia, National Coordination Centre For Border Management, 2014, *National Integrated Border Management Development Strategy 2015 – 2019* [<http://www.igu.gov.mk/files/STRATEGY.pdf>], 11 march 2019.

Despite its relatively small size, the country faces serious consequences of increased migratory flows. The territory of the Republic of North Macedonia is crossed by the Western Balkan migration route, with refugees from the Middle East trying to enter Hungary and then go deeper into Europe. A circular route from Albania to Greece also runs in the vicinity of the Macedonian state. For this reason, during the migration crisis initiated in 2015, Macedonia became one of the countries most affected by the uncontrolled influx of migrants, and it had to start tackling this problem quickly. According to Aleksandar Lj. Spasov PhD, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law 'Iustinianus Primus', University 'Ss. Cyril and Methodius' in Skopje and Programme Manager of Progress-Institute for Social Democracy in Skopje „*the Greek-Macedonian border became a symbol for the desperate attempts of thousands of men, women and children trying to cross the border and continue to their dream destination in the European Union.*”<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Dr. Spasov stresses the institutional instability of the Republic of North Macedonia as the main cause of the country's problems and, at the same time, as a factor preventing it from coping with the uncontrolled influx of migrants on its own. As he claims „*the response of the Macedonian authorities to the crisis was as chaotic and disorganised as the common EU approach to the crisis appears to be. If we take the types of responses to the crisis as a criterion for evaluation, Macedonia passed through three phases in the crisis of 2015*”.<sup>5</sup> These three phases were qualified by the researcher as follows:

- phase I, lasting from spring to summer 2015, is a period when refugees were treated as illegal border crossers and imprisoned for months in very poor living conditions;

- phase II, lasting from summer 2015, is the period during which the Macedonian authorities stopped imprisoning migrants, realising that Macedonia is a transit country on a journey to Western European countries in order to apply for asylum there;

- phase III, which began in the autumn of 2015, is a period of exploiting the migration crisis to achieve the political objectives of the ruling party, both within the country and internationally. At the same time,

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<sup>4</sup> Aleksandar Lj. Spasov, *A Macedonian perspective on the migration crisis*, 2016, [<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/macedonian-perspective-migration-crisis>], 22 February 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

it was a period of bloody fighting and riots between the Macedonian services and migrants.

All three phases of the conflict create an image of Macedonia incapable of coping with the migration crisis on its own. In addition to institutional problems, the country's weakness was also affected by the conflict with Greece, which has been going on for years, since the break-up of Yugoslavia when Macedonia declared independence on 17 November 1991. This conflict arose primarily from Greece's rebellion against the use of the name Macedonia by the newly created state. According to Greece, the name Macedonia is reserved for the ancient kingdom of Macedonia, whose legacy is an inherent part of Greek culture and tradition. According to the Greeks, the name cannot therefore be used by another country. Moreover, Greece also claimed the rights to Macedonian symbols, which, according to the Greeks, are part of the national heritage of that country. The Greek-Macedonian conflict had a negative impact on Macedonia's economy, as Greece imposed a trade embargo on Macedonia, which was lifted in 1995 after Macedonia agreed to use the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as well as a change in the national flag, which until then referred to the ancient Macedonia.<sup>6</sup>

However, hostile socio-political relations between neighbouring countries and economic problems are not the only consequences of the situation. The Greek-Macedonian conflict has also hindered Macedonia's accession to NATO and the European Union. The Republic of North Macedonia has been a candidate country for accession to the European Union since December 2005.<sup>7</sup> In 2015, the European Union presented to Macedonia "Urgent Reform Priorities", mainly related to the introduction of the rule of law in the country. Their implementation is one of the requirements that the country must meet in order to become a member of the European Union. In turn, the Republic of Macedonia has been associated with NATO since 1995, when the Head of Government of Macedonia signed a framework agreement within the partnership for

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<sup>6</sup> European Stability Initiative, *Macedonia's dispute with Greece*, 2012, [<https://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=562>], 28 February 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *North Macedonia*, European Commission, [[https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/north-macedonia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/north-macedonia_en)], 28 February 2019.

peace.<sup>8</sup> Since 1999, Macedonia has been trying to join NATO.<sup>9</sup> On 6th February 2019 the breakthrough took place and the Republic of North Macedonia (still under its previous name – the Republic of Macedonia or the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) signed an accession protocol with NATO. Under this protocol, the country will apply for full membership in NATO structures. Under the agreement signed by the heads of the Foreign Ministries of Greece and Macedonia on 12 February 2019, Macedonia changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia.<sup>10</sup> In return, Greece undertook to stop blocking Macedonia's integration with the European Union and NATO.

The weakness of the Republic of North Macedonia in the area of preventing and combating cross-border threats related to uncontrolled inflow of migrants, in addition to institutional problems and tense relations with Greece, was also affected by the lack of a separate, specialised service dealing exclusively with border surveillance, such as the Border Guard. In the early days of the independent Macedonian state, a separate border unit of the army of the Republic of Macedonia was responsible for border protection. However, thanks to the country's European aspirations, i.e. the desire to join international organisations – the European Union and NATO – it became necessary to reform the system of border protection. To this end, in October 2003. The Government of the Republic of Macedonia adopted a national strategy for integrated border management.<sup>11</sup> Since 2004, the problem of border security in the Republic of North Macedonia has been dealt with by a separate police unit called Border Police. The unit, within the scope of its competences, deals with border protection, regulating the rules concerning the stay of foreigners on the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, developing the concept of border security management,

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<sup>8</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Signatures of Partnership for Peace Framework Document*, 2012, [[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_82584.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_82584.htm)], 28 February 2019.

<sup>9</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Membership Action Plan (MAP)*, 2019 [[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_37356.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37356.htm)], 12 March 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Polska Agencja Prasowa, *Ateny i Skopje podpisały porozumienie ws. nazwy Macedonii*, 2018 [<https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1457628%2Cateny-i-skopje-podpisyly-porozumienie-ws-nazwy-macedonii.html>], 12 March 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Ministerstvo Za Vnatrešni Raboti Republika Severna Makedonija, *Istorijat*, [<https://mvr.gov.mk/page/istorijat-sgrm>], 26 March 2019.

cooperation with the European Border Guard and Coastal Frontex in the field of adaptation of border protection of Macedonia to European standards, as well as conducting joint patrols with the neighbouring countries – Serbia, Kosovo, Albania and Bulgaria.<sup>12</sup> However, the Police of the Republic of North Macedonia does not carry out joint patrols with conflicting Greece, which is a weakness in the Macedonian border protection system, as it is precisely the Greek-Macedonian border that is a weak point around which migrants arriving in Europe have concentrated.

### **Polish-Macedonian cooperation**

Polish-Macedonian cooperation had begun many years before the migration crisis emerged in Europe. On 16 June 2008 an agreement was signed between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Macedonia on cooperation in combating organised crime and other types of crime.<sup>13</sup> In the agreement, *the parties undertook to cooperate between authorities competent in matters of public safety and security in combating organised crime and other types of crime by preventing and detecting and prosecuting perpetrators of crime.*<sup>14</sup> Among the types of crimes to be combated within the framework of the established cooperation, there are also crimes of *illegal crossing the state border and organising illegal migration and smuggling of goods,*<sup>15</sup> as well as crimes of *trafficking in human beings and deprivation of liberty.*<sup>16</sup> The Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard has been appointed as one of the authorities competent to perform the agreement. Almost a decade before the outbreak of the migration crisis, these two countries decided to cooperate in combating migratory threats. At present, we can observe the implementation of the provisions of the Agreement, following the fate of the Polish Border Guard stationed in Macedonia, where it helps the local police.

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<sup>12</sup> Ministerstvo Za Vnatrešni Raboti Republika Severna Makedonija, *Organizaciona Postavenost i Nadležnosti* <https://mvr.gov.mk/page/organizaciona-postavenost-i-nadlezhnosti>, 27 March 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Macedonia on cooperation in combating organised crime and other types of crime, signed in Warsaw on 16 June 2008, *Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland* 2009, no. 46, item 378.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, Article 1, point. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, Article 1, point. 1, section 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, Article 1, point. 1, section 6.

The initiative to establish Polish-Macedonian cooperation in the field of border protection was taken by the Republic of North Macedonia, asking Poland for support. The Executive Protocol between the Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard and the Ministry of the Internal Affairs – Office for Public Security of the Republic of North Macedonia to the 2008 Agreement was signed on 22 April 2016.<sup>17</sup> The first round of the Border Guard officers to support the Macedonian Police in the fight against an uncontrolled influx of migrants began its service on 5 May 2016, when 30 officers and all equipment necessary to perform their duties abroad went to Macedonia in order to perform their duties until 19 June of the same year. After returning from the mission, Border Guard Colonel Artur Bazydło, an officer participating in the mission, gave an interview for the local media, in which he confirmed that the Polish mission in Macedonia was very intensive, because this region is particularly affected by the problem of illegal migration, which has a significant impact on the whole Europe. As the officer reported: *"during our stay in Macedonia, we detained more than 1,500 refugees, whom we handed over to the Macedonian police. Above all, we have dealt with criminal groups, mass border crossings, money transfers, criminal activities, trafficking. We detained as many as 300 people in one day."*<sup>18</sup> The Border Guard Colonel, Artur Bazydło, also emphasised that *"as a support service we disturbed the local business, which is the transfer of people. Our work made it difficult for smugglers to operate, and the rate for smuggling one person increased. It was a typical criminal activity and you had to be careful who you were dealing with."*<sup>19</sup> As the officer pointed out, cross-border problems in the Republic of North Macedonia are not only an excessive number of migrants coming to the country, but above all a high percentage of criminal activities related to trafficking in human beings and smuggling people across the border. Trafficking in human beings is not only a cross-border crime, but above all a real threat to the lives and health of those who are

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<sup>17</sup> *Executive Protocol between the Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard and the Ministry of the Interior - Office for Public Security to the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Republic of Macedonia on cooperation in combating organised crime and other forms of crime, signed in Warsaw on 16 June 2008.*

<sup>18</sup> *Urząd Miasta Lubañ, Ze wsparciem dla Macedonii*, 2019 [<http://luban.pl/artykul/108677/ze-wsparciem-dla-macedonii>], 18 March 2019].

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*



prepared to pay smugglers for helping them to get into Europe in search of a better life. This fact significantly hinders the hard work of Border Guard and Border Police officers, who, while taking care of the safety of Macedonian borders, have to show a high level of empathy and not only apprehend illegal migrants, but often also provide them with assistance.

The second round of the Polish Border Guard mission in the Republic of North Macedonia had commenced its service on 19 September 2016 and was stationed until 28 October 2016, carrying out tasks related to the registration of applications for international protection, examination of authenticity of documents and prevention of illegal border crossing outside border crossing points. Subsequent changes take place cyclically, and their duration is about a month, while officers of the Border Guard perform similar tasks during each of them. Currently (as of 20 March 2019), the Border Guard completed the third mission lasting from 25 February to 20 March 2019, and started another, the fourth one, in 2019, and the twenty-fourth round, counting from the beginning of the cooperation, under which officers will perform their service in Macedonia for another month. For this round, as in the case of the previous ones, 30 officers from all Border Guard units were sent.<sup>20</sup>

Each trip of the Border Guard officers to Macedonia is preceded by a preparatory training in the Specialist Training Centre in Lubań. Within the framework of the training, officers take classes in first aid, use of firearms or tactics. They also learn about the legal regulations in force in the Republic of North Macedonia and the culture of the region.<sup>21</sup> Such training is a complementary element for officers who take part in daily courses and train in their home branches, as well as in the Central Border Guard Training Centre in Koszalin, Border Guard Training Centre in Kętrzyn and the Specialist Training Centre for Border Guards in Lubań. The systematic

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<sup>20</sup> Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, *Funkcjonariusze SG wyruszyli na IV misję do Republiki Macedonii Północnej*, 2019

[<https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/7465,Funkcjonariusze-SG-wyruszyli-na-IV-misje-do-Republiki-Macedonii-Polnocnej.html>], 20 March 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Ośrodek Szkoleń Specjalistycznych SG im. gen. bryg. Wilhelma Orlika – Rückemanna, *Straż Graniczna gotowa do kolejnej misji w Macedonii*, 2019 [<https://www.oss.strazgraniczna.pl/oss/aktualnosci/31775,Straż-Graniczna-gotowa-do-kolejnej-misji-w-Macedonii.html>], 20 March 2019.

nature of the training enables to maintain the continuous ability to perform service regardless of the tasks currently being performed. Cooperation with the Republic of North Macedonia, however, requires additional competences from officers, which enable them to perform their service abroad, in a country which is very different from Poland in terms of culture, but also in terms of legal conditions or social situation.

The mission of the Polish Border Guard in the Republic of North Macedonia brings many benefits for both sides. First of all, thanks to the cooperation between border services, the effectiveness of activities related to the protection of Macedonian borders is increased. Moreover, for Macedonian officers, participation in mixed patrols together with Polish border guards enables them to acquire new knowledge and skills, as well as to become familiar with procedures and standards related to border protection in the European Union. The Polish Border Guard, apart from physical assistance and substantive support, also provides technical support, taking with it the equipment necessary for patrolling and border protection – cars and weapons – for missions in the Republic of North Macedonia. Certainly, the Border Police officers can rely on the knowledge, experience and competences of Polish border guards. This new quality in the protection of Macedonian borders also brings measurable political benefits – in cooperation with Poland and other European Union countries Macedonia has the opportunity to become familiar with European standards and introduce changes in its activities, which will bring the country closer to the intended goal – to become a member of NATO and the European Union.

On the other hand, the mission in Macedonia also brings benefits for Poland and the Polish Border Guard. In political terms, it is, first of all, Poland's positive presence on the international arena. In the social dimension – a chance to understand that countries with a completely different culture and geographical characteristics face similar problems, so in the future they may also support Poland. Thanks to their trips to the Republic of North Macedonia, the Border Guard officers become acquainted with the rules of functioning of border guards of other countries not only in theory, but above all in practical terms. It is also an opportunity to establish long-term international relations between the services, to learn how to work effectively

in difficult climatic conditions for Poles, as well as an opportunity to get to

know a different culture. Working with people of different nationalities is a permanent element of service in the Border Guard, so joint Polish-Macedonian patrols enable officers to adapt to functioning in a multicultural environment, which also brings measurable benefits when performing service on the Polish borders, where officers often meet people of different nationalities.

Within this bilateral cooperation, perhaps the next step in the training of the Border Police of the Republic of North Macedonia should be a visit of officers to Poland. Representatives of many European and non-European countries have already stayed and trained in the Border Guard training centres, e.g. officers of border services of Georgia or Vietnam. For the Border Police officers of the Republic of North Macedonia, this would be not only an opportunity to gain valuable knowledge from a more experienced border service, but above all, an opportunity to see how the service in Poland looks like and how the eastern border – one of the wildest external borders of the European Union – is being guarded.

## **Summary**

Despite a significant decrease in the number of migrants arriving in Europe in 2018 compared to previous years, it is still not possible to talk about stabilising the situation and resolving the migration crisis. The negative effects of this uncontrolled wave of migration will surely continue to affect Europe for years to come. This is not just a demographic problem, linked to the overpopulation of European countries' territories, but, above all, a social and political crisis that is being felt across Europe, caused by the expansion of other cultures and Europe's difficulties in meeting the challenges of migration.

Polish-Macedonian cooperation in the field of border protection and combating an uncontrolled influx of migrants may serve not only as an example of how to counteract the real problem of increased migration, but above all as a political example showing that long-term cooperation between two completely separate countries, including one that is not a member of the European Union, is possible.

The Polish Border Guard not only supports the Republic of North Macedonia, but also takes part in other bilateral cooperation missions with European countries, as well as closely cooperates with the European Border Guard and Coastal Frontex, carrying out tasks related to the protection of the European Union's borders as well as combating smuggling, human trafficking and illegal migration. In the case of such a widespread problem as the migration crisis, both in terms of the scale of the phenomenon and its geographical dimension, it seems practically impossible to solve the problem effectively by a single state alone. Irrespective of their membership of organisations such as NATO or the European Union, the effects of the migration crisis have affected all European countries to a greater or lesser extent, and all of them should contribute to solving this problem by supporting each other and cooperating with each other, as Poland does with the Republic of North Macedonia.

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