

NATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA (NCEU-MK)

THE NEW PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM: SECURITY AND INTEGRATION CHALLENGES IN EUROPE, WITH A FOCUS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA



18TH SESSION OF WORKING GROUP 4 JUSTICE, FREEDOM AND SECURITY (CHAPTER 24)

On January 29, 2026, the 18th session of Working Group 4 – Justice, Freedom, and Security (Chapter 24) was held at the "Members of Parliament Club" premises. The central theme, "The New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Security and Integration Challenges in Europe, with a Focus on the Western Balkans and the Republic of North Macedonia," sparked a substantive debate among over 75 key stakeholders—ranging from government officials and the diplomatic corps to academia and the civil sector.



The Strategic Imperative: From a Transit Route to an Active Partner

The main conclusion of the session is unequivocal: the EU's New Pact is not just a "Brussels document," but a framework into which the Western Balkans must integrate its own authentic voice. It is no longer a temporary phenomenon, but a structural challenge that demands a systemic response. There is a real risk that countries in the region could transform from transit zones into countries of longer-term stay, which imposes an urgent need for a proactive strategy rather than passive compliance with obligations.

Key Pillars of the Discussion:

Security and Combating Crime: The Minister of Justice, Igor Filkov, raised the alarm regarding the global nature of migrant smuggling, emphasizing that the consistent implementation of international instruments is the only way to suppress organized crime.

National Framework 2026–2030: The State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Sasho Petrushevski, presented the new National Migration Program. Although alignment with the EU is inevitable, he emphasized that our approach must be adapted to domestic economic realities and capacities.

Economy and the Labor Market: Professor Lazar Jovevski offered a new perspective—migration as a solution to the chronic labor shortage in construction, tourism, and agriculture. Legal migration and successful integration are no longer a choice, but an economic necessity.

Human Rights and Solidarity: Through the presentations of the UNHCR Representative, Nicole Epting, and international partners from Serbia and Slovakia, a strong message was sent that security measures must not compromise humanity and the right to international protection.



Mileva GJUROVSKA

National Coordinator of NCEU-MK, President of the European Movement in North Macedonia

Prof. Dr. Mileva Gjurovska, in her announcement of the session dedicated to Chapter 24 – "Justice, Freedom and Security," reflecting on the role and methodology of the National Convention on the European Union in the Republic of North Macedonia (NCEU-MK), emphasized that this platform for structured and inclusive dialogue, through reasoned expert debate and the participation of representatives from various institutional and professional backgrounds, makes a significant contribution to the reform processes related to the negotiating framework for European Union membership.

She stressed that the contribution of the NCEU-MK is particularly significant in developing a stable and sustainable culture of dialogue among institutions, judges, public prosecutors, financial and security experts, the academic community, civil society, and other professional circles. According to Gjurovska, this model of communication and exchange of expertise represents an essential prerequisite for building broader social consensus on reforms in the area of rule of law and European integration.

In her address, Gjurovska also referred to the relevance of the European Union's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, pointing out that migration in the contemporary geopolitical context represents a long-term and structural challenge, not a temporary phenomenon. She stated that modern migration flows are shaped by a complex interaction of factors – armed conflicts, economic inequalities, climate change, and demographic movements – which imposes the need for a systemic, coordinated, and solidarity-based approach, both at the national and European levels.



Igor FILKOV

Minister of Justice of the Republic of North Macedonia

Igor Filkov, Minister of Justice, in his address emphasized the close connection between migration management and the country's European integration process, pointing out that this issue holds strategic importance within Chapter 24 – "Justice, Freedom and Security."

He stressed that aligning with European standards in this area is not merely a formal obligation in the accession process, but an essential prerequisite for strengthening institutional capacities, the efficiency of the judicial system, and the rule of law.

According to the Minister, migrant smuggling represents a complex and rapidly growing transnational criminal phenomenon that cannot be effectively addressed if action is taken exclusively at the national level, without coordinated international action. There is a real need to develop common standards, intensify information exchange, and enhance operational cooperation between states and relevant international organizations. In this regard, the Republic of North Macedonia has ratified all relevant international instruments, including the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants. However, he identified consistent implementation of these standards as a key challenge, particularly regarding institutional coordination, investigative capacities, and adaptation to the modern technological tools used by criminal networks.

The national response to the migration phenomenon would be more effective if based on enhanced coordination between law enforcement bodies, the prosecution, and the judiciary, which would enable timely detection, prosecution, and sanctioning of migrant smuggling. According to him, this type of crime should be treated within the broader strategy for combating organized crime, through the application of modern and sophisticated investigative methods.

Special emphasis in his discussion was placed on the "follow the money" approach, which today represents one of the most effective mechanisms for dismantling criminal networks. Financial investigations, aimed at detecting and confiscating illegally acquired property, according to Filkov, represent a key instrument for dismantling the infrastructure of organized crime, particularly in conditions of increased digitalization and the use of modern technologies.

Within the framework of legislative reforms, the minister informed that the Ministry of Justice is in the final phase of preparing the new Criminal Code, adopted by the Parliament in January 2026, as well as the new Criminal Procedure Code, which incorporate the latest international standards. These reforms include improving provisions related to migrant smuggling, strengthening financial investigations, and guaranteeing procedural rights, including the protection of victims.

Filkov also addressed the growing volume of international legal assistance, highlighting that in recent years there has been a significant increase in cases related to migrant smuggling. These cases most often involve foreign nationals, which further underscores the need for effective cross-border cooperation.

Filkov in this regard, he emphasized the importance of direct cooperation mechanisms between prosecutors and judges through instruments such as the European Judicial Network and Eurojust.

According to him, the Ministry of Justice actively uses these mechanisms to ensure more efficient information exchange and coordination in proceedings.

The minister also presented specific statistical data, according to which in 2024, 46 cases of migrant smuggling were registered, 44 of which involved European countries, while in 2025 the number increased to 56 cases. Additionally, cases related to organizing criminal groups were also recorded, which, according to him, indicates the growing complexity and adaptability of this type of organized crime.

In the concluding part of his address, he stated: "Migrant smuggling must be treated as organized crime, with financial investigations and the 'follow the money' approach being key to dismantling criminal networks."



Sasho PETRUSHEVSKI

State Secretary, Ministry of
Internal Affairs

In his address, Sasho Petrushevski, State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), emphasized that migration management must be viewed through two complementary lenses—legal and irregular migration where the Ministry of Internal Affairs plays a pivotal role, particularly in addressing security and operational challenges. He stressed that this issue is not closed, but rather marks the beginning of a longer-term process that demands continuous institutional and international cooperation.

Speaking also in his capacity as the National Coordinator for Migration, Migrant Smuggling, and Human Trafficking, Petrushevski informed that a new Program for the 2026–2030 period has been prepared and is expected to be adopted by the Government. The program aims to establish a systemic regulation of policies, moving beyond the simplified and often reductionist interpretations present in public discourse. Its core focus centers on strengthening border control, improving national security, and enhancing institutional coordination. Additionally, it foresees a gradual alignment of legislation with European standards, alongside the introduction of restrictive policies targeting irregular migration.

Petrushevski highlighted the complexity of European asylum and migration policy, labeling it one of the most sensitive policies of the European Union.

In this context, he referred to the new Pact on Asylum and Migration, which envisages the establishment of a faster and more efficient system through reinforced external border controls, accelerated asylum procedures, and mechanisms for sharing responsibility among member states.

He emphasized that the Pact introduces mandatory registration and identification of migrants, a broader use of biometric data, and the principle of mandatory solidarity. However, he also raised significant questions about practical implementation, human rights protection, and the overall impact on countries outside the European Union.

Special emphasis was placed on the position of the Western Balkans, which, according to Petrushevski, is no longer a periphery but an integral part of the broader European migration management system. Countries in the region, including the Republic of North Macedonia, directly feel the consequences of European policies, particularly along the Balkan migration route.

In this regard, he posed a crucial question: Will the region remain a passive recipient of policies, or will it become an active participant in shaping them? According to him, there is a clear need for the countries of the Western Balkans to make a proactive contribution through structured cooperation and institutional inclusion in the relevant processes.

Petrushevski stressed that articulating national positions, experiences, and proposals through regional and European platforms is essential. This will not only allow the European Union to take the specificities of the region into account, but will also contribute to a better understanding and adaptation of European policies at the national level.

Additionally, he pointed to the possibility of developing model policies and regulations tailored to the actual capacities of candidate countries. A regional approach, achieved by creating shared solutions, can enable a gradual and sustainable alignment with the European Union acquis. Ultimately, Petrushevski warned of the risk of the externalisation of migration, namely, shifting the burden onto countries outside the European Union. In such a scenario, transit countries could be transformed into countries of longer-term stay, bringing additional security, institutional, and humanitarian challenges.

He concluded that a proactive, coordinated, and strategic approach is not a choice but a necessity, emphasizing that the Pact on Asylum and Migration should be treated as a joint process in which the Western Balkans must hold a clear position and an active role. Concluding his presentation, he stated: "The Pact on Asylum and Migration must not be viewed merely as a European document. The Western Balkans must have its own voice, position, and strategy in this process."



Nicole EPTING

Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for Central and South-Eastern Europe

In her address, Nicole Epting, UNHCR Representative for Central and South-Eastern Europe, emphasized the importance of the New Pact on Asylum and Migration as a crucial instrument that will have direct implications not only for the European Union but also for the countries of the Western Balkans, including the Republic of North Macedonia. She noted that NCEU-MK represents a significant platform for reasoned debate and the exchange of views, which has already made a notable contribution to the country's European integration process.

Epting emphasized that migration and asylum management is not exclusively a European issue, but a shared responsibility that demands a coordinated approach among all stakeholders. According to her, the implications of the Pact will be felt on multiple levels through border procedures, screening mechanisms, responsibility sharing systems, and return policies which will directly affect migration flows and institutional systems in the region.

In this regard, she emphasised that it is essential for Western Balkan countries to be actively involved in implementation processes and to have access to appropriate resources, technical expertise, and partnerships. According to her, this is a prerequisite for effectively adapting to new policies and minimising potential negative effects on national asylum systems.

Referring to UNHCR's recommendations, Epting pointed out that the European Union is facing a complex context of multiple crises that affect migration movements. Under such conditions, she believes it is crucial to preserve core principles—solidarity, the protection of fundamental rights, and respect for international law.

She emphasized that the implementation of the Pact presents an opportunity to demonstrate that it is possible to strike a balance between efficient border management and the protection of human rights. To that end, UNHCR recommends strengthening protection mechanisms along migration routes, as well as improving conditions in countries of origin and transit.

Additionally, Epting pointed to the need to strengthen national asylum systems, ensure access to protection and inclusion, and reduce risks associated with irregular migration. These measures, according to her, should contribute to a more coordinated, humane, and protection-oriented response to migration challenges.

As a key prerequisite for successful implementation, she highlighted the need for timely preparation, including strengthening institutional capacities, improving reception conditions, staff training, and modernizing infrastructure. These activities are particularly important given the expected impact of the reforms on migration patterns in the region.

Epting also stressed the significance of the solidarity mechanism as a central element of the Pact, which aims to ensure a fair distribution of responsibilities among European Union member states. In parallel, she pointed to the need for sustainable and predictable funding, which should also encompass partner countries in the Western Balkans.

Regarding specific support in the Republic of North Macedonia, she informed that UNHCR is actively working on the strengthening protection-sensitive mechanisms through the standardized registration systems, multilingual informational tools, and capacity building for frontline officers.

In addition, digital solutions are being developed to improve asylum case management, strengthen communication with applicants, and provide quality interpretation, with the ultimate goal of increasing the efficiency, transparency, and fairness of the procedures.

Epting also highlighted the importance of local integration as a long-term pillar of migration policies, noting that the Republic of North Macedonia is working on a new strategy and action plan aimed at providing access to basic services such as healthcare, education, social protection, and the labor market.

In conclusion, she reaffirmed UNHCR's commitment to partnering with institutions in the country and the region, emphasising that a coordinated approach can build sustainable systems that provide protection while contributing to social stability and development. Concluding her statement, she emphasised: "The implementation of the Pact must show that it is possible to ensure effective migration management without compromising the protection of fundamental human rights."



Baskim BESIMI

National Coordinator of NCEU-MK, President of the European Movement in North Macedonia

In his address, Bashkim Besimi, President of the Council of Public Prosecutors, focused on institutional coordination between the public prosecutor's office and the police as a crucial prerequisite for effective criminal prosecution, particularly in the context of complex crimes related to migration. Like the previous speakers, he also pointed out the special significance of institutional cooperation as an essential element for achieving the goals of criminal proceedings—detecting, prosecuting, and sanctioning perpetrators, while simultaneously guaranteeing the legality and fairness of the process.

Besimi emphasized that, in accordance with the Law on Criminal Procedure, the public prosecutor's office plays a central role in leading the pre-investigative procedure, with the public prosecutor coordinating and directing the activities of the police and other competent bodies. According to him, this hierarchical and functional relationship ensures a unified and coordinated approach to gathering evidence and prevents fragmented action.

In this context, the police act upon the orders and directions of the public prosecutor, taking actions to detect criminal offenses, secure evidence, and gather relevant information. Additionally, the legal obligation to promptly notify the prosecutor's office of any criminal offense prosecuted ex officio (by official duty) is key to the timely activation of criminal proceedings.

Besimi also referred to the importance of cooperation protocols, which complement the legal framework by providing more detailed regulation of communication, coordination, and information exchange. According to him, these mechanisms enable more efficient and harmonised action without compromising the institutional autonomy of the involved bodies.

Furthermore, he highlighted the authority of the public prosecutor to issue orders for specific investigative actions, including the application of special investigative measures, which is particularly significant in cases of organized crime. This setup, according to him, ensures a functional system that simultaneously guarantees the efficiency of the procedure and the protection of human rights.

In conclusion, Besimi underlined that this institutional framework is the foundation of the rule of law and is of particular importance in addressing contemporary security challenges, including migrant smuggling and related crimes.

Andrej LEPAVCOV

Ambassador, European Movement in North Macedonia;



Andrej Lepavcov marked the transition from the institutional addresses to the expert discussion, emphasizing that the composition of the panel allows for an in-depth analysis of the complex aspects of migration and asylum. He noted that the presentations so far had provided a solid foundation through relevant data and institutional positions, upon which the expert debate would build.

Reflecting on the broader context, Lepavcov recalled that the European Union's current policies in this area are the result of experiences from the 2014–2015 migrant crisis, which seriously disrupted the functioning of the Schengen system. According to him, it was precisely this "collective trauma" that prompted the EU, after nearly a decade, to adopt the Pact on Migration and Asylum as an attempt to establish a more regulated and coordinated approach.

He emphasised that the Republic of North Macedonia, as a candidate country, must proactively align itself with these policies, given its geopolitical position and the fact that it is surrounded by EU member states. At the same time, he pointed out specific challenges—an increased need for legal labour alongside the parallel continuity of transit-based irregular migration—which demand a careful balancing of policies.

Lepavcov assessed that the country is already significantly integrated into operational coordination with European mechanisms, including through cooperation with Frontex, but underlined that a clear definition of national interests is essential. According to him, European policies should not merely be adopted, but must be adapted in accordance with domestic institutional and economic realities.

In conclusion, he noted that the discussion on the Pact on Migration and Asylum will remain relevant over the long term, and that today's session is part of a broader, continuous analytical process aimed at creating informed and sustainable policies at both national and regional levels.

Concluding his thoughts, he stated: "It is essential to adapt European migration policies to our national interests and actual capacities, instead of just adopting them as ready-made solutions."



Angela BORANIEVA

Director of the MARRI Regional
Center

In her presentation, Angela Boranieva, Director of the MARRI Center, spoke of migration as a reality that is already deeply shaping the security systems, institutions, and local communities in the Western Balkans. According to her, the region can no longer be observed as a peripheral zone of European migration policies, but rather as an area with significant practical experience and direct exposure to migration flows. She recalled that since 2015, more than one million people have transited through the Western Balkan route, which, despite the reduced intensity of the movements, confirms that the region remains a significant transit corridor toward the European Union.

In her address, Boranieva focused specifically on the structural demographic challenges facing the countries of the region, particularly the brain drain of young and skilled labor. According to her, it is precisely this parallel process—intensified migration movements toward the region and continuous emigration from it—that creates the need for regulated and well-managed legal migration. She emphasised that migration must no longer be treated as an ad hoc or crisis-driven issue, but viewed as a long-term structural process that requires strategic, institutionalised, and sustainable policies, aligned both with European standards and the actual realities on the ground in the region.

Referring to the Pact on Migration and Asylum, Boranieva noted that its significance lies in creating a more coordinated and solidarity-based framework that integrates policies on border management, asylum, return, and the distribution of responsibilities. For the countries of the Western Balkans, she believes this means not only new obligations but also an opportunity to better structure and modernize national systems.

She pointed out that borders do not function in isolation, but rather as part of an interconnected system where developments in one country directly affect neighboring countries. This, according to her, is particularly important in the context of migrant smuggling and human trafficking, where criminal networks are highly adaptive and most often target the most vulnerable categories of the population.

Additionally, Boranieva pointed to the need to modernise border infrastructure and introduce integrated border management to respond to the increased volume of legal and irregular movements.

She also highlighted the visa policy as a particularly sensitive area, emphasising that any misalignment could increase the risk of abuse and irregular movement.

he singled out return and readmission procedures as a specific challenge that could intensify further with the implementation of the Pact. According to her, this will require strengthened regional coordination, more effective communication, as well as improved cooperation with countries of origin to sustainably manage these processes.

In that context, Boranieva highlighted the role of MARRI as a key regional platform for policy coordination, information exchange, and capacity building. Through this initiative, she believes the countries of the Western Balkans can define common priorities and act more harmoniously on European policies.

She warned that without proper management, a serious gap could emerge between the European Union's expectations and the countries' actual institutional capacities in the region. Therefore, as she emphasized, it is essential to continuously strengthen administrative, technical, and human resources, as well as to develop modern systems for data management, risk analysis, and institutional coordination.

In conclusion, Boranieva noted that the Pact should not be perceived as an externally imposed process, but as a shared framework in which success will depend on the active participation of the region. According to her, early involvement, transparency, and investments in institutional capacities represent key prerequisites for an effective partnership with the European Union.

Concluding her thoughts, she stated: "Migration in the Western Balkans is a structural process that requires long-term, coordinated, and sustainable policies, rather than ad hoc solutions."

Trpe STOJANOVSKI

NCEU-MK expert, Professor at
the Faculty of Security – UKLO



In his presentation, Trpe Stojanovski provided an analytical overview of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, emphasising that although it is a significant and long-prepared document, its implementation is unfolding within an exceptionally dynamic context that demands constant updating and adaptation. According to him, migration as a phenomenon is changing at a very rapid pace, which creates a risk that certain solutions envisioned by the Pact may become partially "obsolete" even during the early stages of their application.

Stojanovski assessed that the Pact is controversial even within the European Union itself, but more importantly, that the countries of the Western Balkans are not sufficiently prepared for its implications. He emphasized that the region faces serious economic, social, and political challenges, as well as issues related to the protection of human rights, which necessitates much more intensive preparation and long-term strategic planning.

In his address, Stojanovski pointed out that the European Union, through its agencies and instruments such as Frontex and the Asylum Agency, develops implementation mechanisms primarily through the prism of its own interests. In such a context, he believes that the countries of the region are often left to adapt to the new standards on their own, which creates an asymmetric relationship and additional pressure on their institutional capacities.

As an example of the need for a more proactive and timely approach, Stojanovski pointed to the issue facing Macedonian transport carriers, who had long highlighted problems related to stay restrictions in European Union countries. He stressed that although this problem was detected early on, the institutional response was neither fast enough nor systematically structured, creating additional difficulties for the transport sector. According to him, this case clearly underscores the broader problem of insufficient readiness to timely recognise and manage the consequences of European policies that directly impact the countries of the region.

Reflecting on international support, Stojanovski highlighted the projects of organisations such as the ICMPD and the International Organisation for Migration as significant instruments for strengthening national capacities. However, he emphasised that alongside technical support, much stronger political coordination is needed within regional initiatives like MARRI to establish a more harmonised approach to new challenges.

He also pointed out that the countries of the Western Balkans find themselves at different levels of European integration, which further complicates policy coordination and alignment. Therefore, according to him, it is essential to define a shared regional approach, as well as a clear national vision for migration especially in conditions where labor migration is increasingly emerging as a distinct and strategically important policy.

In conclusion, Stojanovski emphasised that the Pact should not be observed in isolation but as part of a broader process that requires enhanced institutional coordination, stronger regional networking, and much more active participation by the Western Balkan countries. Only through such an approach, he believes, will it be possible to respond in a timely and effective manner to the new obligations and challenges arising from European migration policy.

Concluding his thoughts, he stated: "A clear national vision and much more intensive coordination are needed so that we can respond in a timely manner to the obligations arising from the Pact on Migration and Asylum."

Nenad SIMIC

Head of the Office for
Coordination of Activities in the
Fight against Trafficking in
Human
Beings, Ministry of Interior of the
Republic of Serbia



In his presentation, Nenad Simić provided an analytical overview of human trafficking and migration as two closely interconnected phenomena that are increasingly taking on the character of transnational organized crime. Drawing on his years of experience in the criminal police, he pointed out that contemporary migration flows cannot be analysed in isolation from the security risks associated with migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and the operations of organised criminal networks.

Simić emphasised that while the countries of the region have largely adopted strategic and normative frameworks aligned with European standards, the core challenge remains their practical and operational implementation. According to him, it is precisely at the operational level that the real institutional capability to handle complex security threats is tested, especially under conditions where criminal structures constantly adapt to new migration routes and policies.

In his analysis of the regional context, Simić noted that the Republic of Serbia, like other countries in the Western Balkans, plays a major role as a transit point for migration flows toward the European Union. According to him, this imposes a need for much more intensive regional and international cooperation, which must not remain solely at a political or declarative level. In this regard, he highlighted joint patrols, the direct exchange of information through contact centers and liaison officers, as well as deepened operational cooperation with European agencies, particularly Frontex.

In his address, Simić also elaborated on the reform processes in the field of border management and security. He singled out key priorities such as strengthening border controls, improving security within asylum centers, reinforcing controls within the interior of the territory, and establishing sustainable return and readmission mechanisms. According to him, these processes cannot be effective without the parallel modernization of policing through the introduction of new IT systems, advanced technologies, and digital tools for security risk management.

Simić paid special attention to institutional development and organizational changes within the border police, stressing the need to introduce advanced systems for surveillance, passenger data management, and biometric identification. According to him, technological modernisation must be accompanied by continuous training, specialisation, and professionalisation of personnel, since no reform can produce sustainable results without human capacity.

In the section dedicated to human trafficking, Simić highlighted the significance of drafting a new law on combating human trafficking, which has already received a positive assessment from the European Commission. He emphasized that the legal solution incorporates most of the relevant European directives and recommendations, representing an important step in the process of aligning with European legislation and strengthening the institutional response to this form of organized crime.

In conclusion, Simić assessed that effectively tackling migration and human trafficking requires a coordinated, systemic, and regional approach, where the rapid exchange of information, operational coordination, and joint action among institutions remain vital prerequisites.

Concluding his presentation, he stated: "Human trafficking and migration are two closely related phenomena—without strong regional cooperation and operational implementation, real results cannot be achieved."



Goran PAVLOVSKI

MIA

In his presentation, Goran Pavlovski offered a practical and operational perspective based on years of experience in the border police, emphasizing that migration management is a process that demands fast, informed, and coordinated decisions, especially under conditions of constantly changing European policies and security circumstances. According to him, institutions today are significantly better prepared than they were during the 2015–2016 migrant crisis, yet they continue to face complex and dynamic challenges.

Reflecting on the experiences from that crisis, Pavlovski recalled that approximately one million migrants transited through the Republic of North Macedonia, during which a more open approach was applied in the initial phase, later replaced by more restrictive measures. According to him, it was precisely this shift that led to an intensification of migrant smuggling and human trafficking, significantly transforming the security context in the region.

In his address, Pavlovski informed that a registration and profiling system currently operates on the southern border, which includes biometric identification and data exchange with partner countries and the European Union. This system, according to him, enables more efficient monitoring and control of migration flows, as well as better operational coordination with international partners.

He emphasized that the Republic of North Macedonia is neither a source nor a final destination for migration, but primarily a transit zone, which makes it substantially dependent on support and coordination with the European Union. In this regard, Pavlovski highlighted the importance of cooperation with Frontex, as well as the engagement of foreign police officers, who contribute to improving operational coordination and information exchange.

Regarding the fight against irregular migration, he pointed out that significant resources have been invested, including the deployment of specialized units and teams to tackle organized crime. At the same time, Pavlovski indicated that the state must concurrently work on improving conditions for legal travelers, keeping in mind the continuous increase in cross-border traffic and mobility.

He paid special attention to new European systems such as the EES and ETIAS, assessing that they represent a major step in strengthening security, but simultaneously create serious operational challenges—particularly regarding processing times, administrative procedures, and the technical readiness of border crossings. According to him, these changes directly impact the daily operations of border services and require additional institutional and technical adaptations.

Pavlovski noted that the number of irregular migrants in 2025 dropped significantly compared to the crisis period, which, in his view, indicates a certain stabilization of the system. However, he warned that the state must not remain focused exclusively on the security aspect, but must also carefully monitor the consequences for citizens, local communities, and the daily functioning of society.

Reflecting on the Pact on Migration and Asylum, Pavlovski stressed that its acceptance within the European Union is uneven and that member states hold varying positions. In such a context, according to him, the Republic of North Macedonia must clearly define and protect its own national interests, especially regarding readmission and return management.

Ultimately, his concluding outlook is that the country has a solid foundation for migration management, but future policies will require further adjustments, investments, and a careful balance between security and mobility: "As a transit country, we must protect our own interests, especially regarding readmission, while simultaneously adapting to the new European systems and standards."



**Miroslava
MITTELMANNOVA**

Program Director of the Human
Rights League, Slovakia

In her presentation, Miroslava Mittelmanova offered a comprehensive overview of the transformation of the Slovak migration system, emphasizing that the experiences of recent years have clearly confirmed the need for systemic readiness to manage increased migration flows. According to her, Slovakia is gradually transforming from a country with limited openness into a destination country, which creates new institutional, legal, and social challenges.

Pointing to current circumstances, Mittelmanova informed that around 360,000 foreigners with varying legal statuses reside in Slovakia, including individuals under temporary protection, mostly from Ukraine. This development, in her view, dictates a continuous adaptation of legislation, including through the new Law on International Protection and amendments to the regulations on the residence of foreigners.

In her address, she specifically highlighted the need to establish effective and independent oversight over the work of institutions. From a civil society perspective, transparency and control mechanisms represent an essential prerequisite for building trust in the migration system. In this regard, she pointed to the role of the Public Defender of Rights (Ombudsman) in Slovakia as a positive example, who oversees the conduct of state authorities through the national preventive mechanism.

Mittelmanova also emphasised the importance of inter-institutional cooperation, especially between state bodies, civil society organisations, and international partners. According to her, the 2022 experience showed that coordination and rapid communication significantly increase the system's efficiency, particularly during crisis-driven influxes of migrants.

Special emphasis in her presentation was placed on the training of officials and the practical application of human rights standards. She stressed that the manner of communication with migrants, their level of information, and their access to procedures directly affect the fairness and effectiveness of the migration system.

Reflecting on the Pact on Migration and Asylum, Mittelmanova pointed out that the Slovak position is cautious, particularly regarding mandatory relocation. However, according to her, accepting a limited number of individuals is an expression of European solidarity, even though the current institutional focus remains largely on financial mechanisms and operational support.

She emphasised that the countries of the Western Balkans, including the Republic of North Macedonia, play a major role in the European migration system, particularly regarding secondary movements and return policies. This, in her view, requires much greater coordination, mutual trust, and policy alignment among states.

In the section dedicated to the local level, Mittelmanova highlighted municipalities' role as key actors in providing services and integrating migrants. As a successful example, she pointed to "one-stop" centers, which enable fast, coordinated, and more efficient access to services for people on the move.

Speaking on integration, she underlined that access to the labor market, education, and social services represents an important factor for social stability and the reduction of security risks. Based on her experience, the economic inclusion of migrants should not be perceived as a threat, but rather as a potential contribution to social and economic development.

Additionally, Mittelmanová warned of the specific risks associated with vulnerable categories, particularly unaccompanied minors, who can frequently find themselves in legal vacuums and become exposed to exploitation or human trafficking.

In her concluding insights, it was emphasized that European migration policy must remain firmly grounded in respect for human dignity and human rights as a fundamental value: "European migration policy must strike a balance between security and protection, and every procedure must begin with respect for human dignity."



Lazar JOVEVSKI

Professor, Faculty of law
"Iustinianus Primus" – Skopje

Lazar Jovevski opened the discussion from a labour market perspective, emphasising that migration and asylum should be analysed as two complementary yet distinct processes with significant implications for the economy and society. He assessed that opening up this topic is essential for understanding contemporary structural challenges.

Jovevski made a clear distinction between forced migration, which leads to seeking asylum, and economic or labour migration, which stems from labour market needs. According to him, both processes have historical continuity, but today they are taking on new dynamics amid globalisation and demographic change. Within the framework of labour migration, he pointed out that it is important to distinguish between workers who arrive through an institutional call and those who arrive in response to demand from the business sector. This distinction, according to him, has direct implications for regulatory policies and integration capacities.

Jovevski stressed that the labour market is the strongest instrument for integration, but warned that states do not always have the capacity to absorb large numbers of individuals, especially when their numbers do not align with real economic needs. In this context, he cited Poland as an example, which gradually shifted from social support to the economic integration of migrants.

Reflecting on the situation in the Republic of North Macedonia, he noted that the labour market has undergone significant transformations over the last two decades. Although the unemployment rate is relatively low, there is a serious labour shortage in several sectors. He singled out construction, tourism and hospitality, the textile industry, and agriculture as the most affected, where the shortage of workers is already impacting productivity and competitiveness. In parallel, he pointed to the continuous outflow of the domestic workforce, particularly toward European Union countries.

Jovevski described this situation as a "market paradox", the simultaneous existence of unemployment and a shortage of workers. According to him, existing measures such as retraining and additional qualifications are not yielding sufficient results, partly due to low interest among unemployed individuals.



**Bratka DEJANOSKA
MILCHEVSKA**

Head of Sector for Asylum,
Department for Civil Affairs,
Ministry
of Internal Affairs of the Republic
of North Macedonia

The presentation by Bratka Dejanoska Milchevska situates the new Pact on Migration and Asylum within the Republic of North Macedonia's existing legal framework, with a particular focus on its significance for the asylum system. She indicates that the current Law on International and Temporary Protection from 2018 is already aligned with key European Union directives, but that the new regulations arising from the Pact impose a need for its further harmonization and revision.

In this regard, it is emphasized that the transformation of directives into regulations creates a new legal dynamic, which requires a more systemic and directly applicable approach in national legislation. Because of this, an inter-ministerial working group has already been formed with the task of conducting a detailed analysis and proposing amendments to the law, aiming for harmonisation with the new European framework. These amendments are expected to come into force in 2027.

The Pact is defined as an instrument for establishing a more harmonised, efficient, and fair system for migration and asylum management at the European Union level. Its key objectives include improved border management, acceleration of asylum procedures, strengthening return mechanisms, and establishing a balance between solidarity and the responsibility of states.

Additionally, the need for a unified application of standards is highlighted in order to reduce so called secondary movements. The Asylum Sector within the Ministry of Internal Affairs actively participates in European networks and working bodies, particularly within the framework of the European Union Agency for Asylum. These activities aim to advance administrative capacities, simplify procedures, and ensure the high-quality, efficient application of the new standards.

However, although the Republic of North Macedonia is not a member of the European Union, it is directly affected by these policies due to its position along the main migration route. This creates a dual challenge: on the one hand, the need for effective control and security, and on the other, the obligation to respect human rights and protect individuals who truly need asylum.

In conclusion, the presentation highlights the complexity of aligning with European migration policies and the need for careful development of legal solutions that are both functional and fairly grounded. The role of national institutions is crucial to striking a balance between security priorities and international obligations in human rights protection.

**Bojana BOZINOVSKA
SILJANOVSKA**

President of the Macedonian
Young Lawyers Association



Bojana Bozhinovska Siljanovska presents the perspective of the civil sector, drawing on years of field experience in asylum, migration, and human rights protection. She emphasises that the Macedonian Young

Lawyers Association, as an organisation with decades of experience and a partnership with the UNHCR, works directly with the affected individuals, which provides insight into the real challenges of the system. This approach allows for an analysis that is not only normative but also empirically grounded.

In her speech, she clearly points out that the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, although a European instrument, already has direct implications for the Republic of North Macedonia. Hence, the need for timely adaptation is not a matter of choice, but an institutional necessity. At the same time, she warns that formal compliance with European standards is not enough unless it is accompanied by the substantive protection of human rights and effective implementation.

A central critical point in the presentation is the lack of a systemic approach to migration management.

She indicates that the state is still operating in a "crisis mode" that has been ongoing continuously since 2016, transforming the crisis from an exception into the rule. Despite certain institutional advancements, significant structural weaknesses remain, including limited reception capacity, an insufficient number of approved asylum applications, and a shortage of human resources and mechanisms to identify vulnerable categories.

Particular emphasis is placed on the legal vacuum surrounding transit centres, as well as the frequent reliance on ad hoc solutions rather than long-term policies. In this context, it is noted that the Republic of North Macedonia finds itself in a complex "in-between position" between its obligations to the European Union and those stemming from international human rights protection instruments, such as the principle of non-refoulement and the prohibition of collective expulsion.

"No European agenda should ever be more important than fundamental human rights."

This statement encapsulates the core of her approach that the security and managerial aspects of migration must not overshadow its legal and humanitarian dimensions. In practical terms, this means ensuring an individualised approach in every procedure, access to legal aid, translation, and effective legal remedies.

Additionally, the issue of missed opportunities in the field of legal migration is raised. Although the state faces a labor shortage and demographic outflow, there is no clear strategy for the integration of foreign workers. According to her, legal migration cannot function without operational institutional mechanisms, including access to the labor market, healthcare, and social protection.

Criticism is also directed at the potential risks posed by new European mechanisms, such as "return hubs" and the concept of a "safe third country." Without adequate legal guarantees, these instruments could lead to violations of fundamental rights, especially among vulnerable categories. In that regard, the need for better identification and protection mechanisms is emphasised, particularly for unaccompanied children and victims of human trafficking.

Furthermore, it is stressed that legal aid should be a central element of the system. Practice shows that individuals in migration detention often lack sufficient information about their rights, as well as effective mechanisms for legal protection. This indicates a serious gap between the legal framework and its implementation.

In conclusion, she emphasises that preparing for the new migration policies requires a comprehensive approach: timely legislative changes, investments in human resources, clear protocols, stable funding, and, above all, the establishment of independent monitoring with active participation from the civil sector. Only in this way can a functional and sustainable system be built.

Ultimately, the presentation redefines migration not solely as a security challenge but as a complex social process requiring a balanced, well-grounded, and strategic approach. Instead of perceiving migration as a permanent crisis, she proposes developing a system based on rules, accountability, and respect for human rights, which can simultaneously generate social benefits.



The discussion that followed the panel was analytically rich and expanded the topic from a normative legal framework to practical, security, and operational challenges related to migration in the Western Balkans region.

One of the key conclusions was that the implementation of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum will be uneven and problematic even within the European Union itself. Participants emphasized that there are significant differences among member states regarding readiness and approaches, which directly affects the region as well. In this context, the need for the Western Balkans to be proactively included in the process was stressed in order to avoid creating "gaps" in the management of migration flows.

In parallel, a lack of public discourse on these issues was noted, particularly in Serbia, where the topic remains predominantly institutional and does not receive broader public debate. This points to a democratic deficit regarding public awareness and involvement in policy-making.

A significant part of the discussion was dedicated to the security dimension. Participants pointed to the risks of connections between migration flows and organised crime, as well as the potential link to radicalisation and violent extremism. It was especially highlighted that organised criminal groups in the region operate transnationally and are characterised by "poly-criminality"—meaning the ability to quickly pivot to different illegal activities (migrant smuggling, weapons, drugs) using the same logistical networks.

Additionally, it was emphasised that corruption, including systemic corruption, is a significant factor facilitating the functioning of these criminal networks, often through the involvement of institutional representatives.

In an operational sense, serious practical obstacles were identified, such as the insufficient funding for translation services in criminal proceedings. This problem directly affects the efficiency of investigations and judicial processes, particularly in cases of organised crime with a transnational character. Additionally, the lack of translations for rare languages and dialects complicates the situation.

One of the more prominent trends highlighted was the digitisation of criminal activities. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are increasingly taking place through digital channels, using cryptocurrencies and online communication, which significantly complicates the tracking of financial flows and the collection of evidence. This creates a need to strengthen capacities for digital forensics and financial investigations.

Regarding crisis management, an important distinction was made between a "state of crisis" and a "state of emergency," explaining that the current situation on the southern border of the Republic of North Macedonia is formally a state of crisis, based on a high-risk assessment. Data shows that the majority of migrants enter through Greece, with a significant percentage using illegal routes and established smuggling fees.

From a prosecutorial perspective, it was emphasised that migrant smuggling represents a highly profitable and well-organised business, with stable networks along the Balkan route. At the same time, an often-overlooked aspect was highlighted—crimes committed against the migrants themselves, including abuses by individuals within state institutions.

In the area of asylum and integration, statistics show that the Republic of North Macedonia remains predominantly a transit country, with a very low number of approved asylum applications. The main reason is not a restrictive policy, but the fact that asylum seekers leave the country before the procedures are completed. Nevertheless, examples of successful integration were mentioned, indicating that potential does exist.

Finally, the discussion opened up the economic dimension of migration. It was stressed that the labor shortage requires a strategic approach to legal migration, including clear quotas, better procedures, and integration policies. The example of Croatia was pointed out as indicative of the growing demand for a foreign workforce, which is part of a broader regional migration cycle.