

ПРИЗНАЦИ ЗА РАДИКАЛИЗАЦИЯ, ЕКСТРЕМИЗЪМ И ПРИНАДЛЕЖНОСТ КЪМ ТЕРОРИСТИЧНИ ГРУПИ СРЕД НЕЛЕГАЛНИ МИГРАНТИ: АНАЛИЗ НА СЛУЧАИ ОТ ПРАКТИКАТА

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РЕЗЮМЕ:

Докладът представя анализ на реални случаи от оперативната практика в противодействието на нелегалната миграция, радикализацията и тероризма. Същите са базирани на събития от работния процес в контекста на оперативни разработки и високорискови операции по установяване и задържане на нелегални мигранти на територията на страната.

Докладът анализира оперативната обстановка и общите рискови признаци установени сред мигрантите. Предлага утвърден и изпитан алгоритъм за действие към оперативните служители и агенти с цел допринасяне към по-доброто разбиране на процесите на радикализация в миграционния контекст и идентифициране на лица с рисков профил при противодействието на престъпността и защитата на националната сигурност.

Ключови думи: нелегална миграция, радикализация, криминално разузнаване, тероризъм, национална сигурност, психология, оперативна тактика

INDICATORS OF RADICALIZATION, EXTREMISM AND TERRORIST GROUP AFFILIATION AMONG ILLEGAL MIGRANTS: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS FROM THE OPERATIONAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT:

This report presents an analysis of real cases from operational practice in countering illegal migration, radicalization, and terrorism. These cases are based on events from the working process in the context of operational investigations and high-risk operations for identifying and arresting illegal migrants in Republic of Bulgaria.

The report analyzes the intelligence picture and common risk indicators identified among migrants. It proposes an established and tested algorithm for action for intelligence officers and agents with the aim of contributing to better understanding of radicalization processes in the migration context and identifying individuals with high-risk profiles in the domain of fighting crime and protecting the national security of the state.

Keywords: illegal immigration, radicalization, criminal intelligence, terrorism, national security, state security, psychology, special tactics

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary security landscape in Europe is characterized by an unprecedented convergence of illegal migration flows and evolving terrorist threats, creating complex challenges for national security agencies and law enforcement professionals.

Recent operational data substantiates the critical nature of this security nexus. According to START InSight's database, 16% of terrorists in Europe between 2014 and 2020 were irregular immigrants, with this proportion rising to 25% in 2020, and reaching 33% of perpetrators in France by 2020 [1]. High-profile incidents, including the 2020 Nice church attack perpetrated by a

Tunisian national who entered France illegally via Italy within 48 hours of the attack, demonstrate the operational exploitation of irregular migration routes for terrorist purposes [2][3].

The 2023 Europol public report on terrorism clearly highlights the connection between illegal immigration and its importance for national security. Terrorist organizations and lone wolf radicals utilize the resources of organized criminal groups to illegally infiltrate European nations. The report emphasizes the importance of the Republic of Bulgaria as a geopolitical factor standing at one of the main entry points to Europe and the challenge this threat poses to its internal security and the country's status as a reliable international partner.

As documented in the Europol TE-SAT report: "In August 2022, a Moroccan foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) was arrested in Spain and another Moroccan FTF was arrested in Austria before being extradited to Spain. They had travelled together entering the EU irregularly from Turkey, passing through Bulgaria and the Western Balkan route" [4].

The latest EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (EU TE-SAT) 2025 reports 58 terrorist attacks in 2024 across 14 EU Member States, with 449 individuals arrested for terrorism-related offences, underscoring the persistent and evolving nature of the threat [5].

The contemporary security landscape in Europe is characterized by an unprecedented convergence of illegal migration flows and evolving terrorist threats, creating complex challenges for national security agencies and law enforcement professionals. The intersection of these phenomena has emerged as a critical domain requiring sophisticated analytical approaches and operational methodologies rooted in empirical evidence and field experience.

While extensive theoretical frameworks exist regarding terrorism and migration separately, limited scientific attention has been devoted to the practical methodologies employed by intelligence professionals in identifying potential security threats within migrant populations.

The primary objective of this paper is to establish a scientifically validated framework for identifying individuals with potential terrorist affiliations or radicalization tendencies among illegal migrant groups. Secondary objectives include the development of standardized operational procedures for intelligence officers and the enhancement of threat assessment capabilities within the broader context of European security cooperation.

The findings contribute to the professional development of intelligence practitioners while advancing the scientific understanding of radicalization processes in migration contexts.

The research scope encompasses multiple dimensions of security analysis, including behavioral assessment, technological forensics, religious extremism indicators, and organizational structures within migrant communities. Each dimension is examined through the lens of operational experience, ensuring practical relevance and immediate applicability to field operations.

II. METHODOLOGY AND KEY TERMS

The methodology for this research relies on qualitative data analyses on a diverse array of open-source information, including books, online articles, academic articles, news articles, other textual materials and the personal professional experience of the author. Additionally, the view of the author are influenced by uncited classified sources with varying levels of security clearance according to the Bulgarian Classified Information Act, ranging from "For Official Use Only" to "Confidential" and "Secret." Off course, this data is not presented in the current article and its involvement is purely of the analytical aspect and quality of the author.

This mixed-methods approach, combining open-source and classified information, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The use of publicly available sources ensures transparency, while the specific of the professional involvement of the author provides insights otherwise inaccessible in open domains. The covered period of the research is focused in the last three years and it represents the current trends in this type of criminal activity and schemes involved for practicing it.

This approach above combines the benefits of open access with the depth of classified insights, allowing for a robust analysis. On the positive side, it expands the informational foundation of the research, enhancing reliability where open-source data alone may be insufficient.

However, this methodology also introduces limitations related to confidentiality requirements which exclude citation and must be trusted to the views of the author itself.

III. INTELLIGENCE PICTURE

Illegal migration allows numerous third-country nationals with unclear origin, background, intentions, and religious-political or ideological affiliation to enter and reside within the countries of the European Union[6][7].

In a number of EU and European Economic Area countries, such individuals have been identified as sleeper cells or active operatives working to expand terrorist networks, undermine national security, and promote openly anti-state, anti-social, or criminal interests[8].

The activities of such individuals in the context of terrorism are directly linked to predicate crimes such as trafficking, concealment and supply of firearms, drug distribution, support for illegal migration routes, and other activities that contribute to the financing or provision of personnel, resources, and tools for carrying out future terrorist acts or actions threatening national security[9][10].

There is ongoing recruitment activity conducted by such illegal migrants, aiming to attract new members into terrorism-related groups and to create covert organizations and communities that may later be used to serve the goals of a terrorist ideology or organization. This is done through financial or ideological influence or other forms of dependency.

Among the illegal migrants, there are also many individuals who, although they may not currently show clear motivation or intent to engage in anti-state activity or support terrorism, have participated in combat, acts of violence, or war crimes. As such, they represent potentially dangerous individuals who are at risk of radicalization and extremism, and who may have serious difficulties adapting into society, even under normal conditions where they might reside legally.

The complicated international environment, the polarization of the world, and the emergence of a new Cold War phase create conditions for external influence—by state or non-state actors—on the internal policies of European Union and NATO member states. This influence is exerted through illegal migration and terrorism, with the aim of weakening and destabilizing member states in order to exploit emerging vulnerabilities and exert successful influence over internal processes[11][12].

The effective identification of illegal migrants who have participated in active combat, committed acts of extreme violence, or show signs of radicalization and extremism enables effective control over events and processes that pose a threat to national security. This is of primary importance for minimizing the consequences and damage that such members of illegal migrant communities could inflict on the world we live in.

IV. EXAMPLES FROM IDENTIFIED CASES

During systematic intelligence operations conducted by officers from the security services, police intelligence units, counter-intelligence agents, and law enforcement personnel in the Republic of Bulgaria, multiple signs and indicators were identified among certain individuals within illegal migrant groups or among individual persons, including micro-groups of illegal migrants forming part of a larger group. These signs indicated a specific affiliation with combat groups/militias, potential terrorist organizations, or demonstrated features of individual radicalization and extremism.

1. Individuals were identified whose mobile devices contained overt or hidden content—found within various apps, folders, or protected through software-based security tools such as passwords, facial recognition, or file protection programs requiring multi-level verification. These

devices included images showing the individuals themselves, their relatives, or acquaintances posing in military uniforms, with weapons, or wearing traditional Arab clothing and holding weapons, often in proximity to military buildings, bases, religious sites, or other sensitive locations.

1.1. The images revealed a clear affiliation between the mobile device owner and combat units, regardless of whether the person appeared in the photos armed or was simply expressing support for, or mimicking, such militarized individuals, groups, or organizations.

1.2 Explicit or concealed images were also discovered on the mobile devices of illegal migrants showing various forms of self-harm. These included photos of the device owners themselves or randomly downloaded content from the internet. Self-harm was often accompanied by religious texts or other religious symbols, most frequently observed on the forearms. A particular reverence was noted for heavy bleeding, which was seen as a visible indicator of successful self-harming and a symbol of the individual's courage and loyalty to Allah.

2.1. Such acts of self-harm are indicative of orthodox and non-secular interpretations of Islam—forms of extremism and radicalization embraced by radical Muslims. In secular and traditional Islam, self-flagellation during the Ashura holiday is part of customary religious rituals honoring Allah. However, when self-harming occurs year-round with an evident obsessive fixation, it reflects a religious deviation in the individual, signaling their progression toward religious radicalization[13].

3. Sensitive information regarding critical infrastructure. Certain mobile applications contain specific sections that display military and police sites, intelligence service buildings, and other sensitive locations. When such files or similar content are found on a mobile device—along with notes—and appear in combination with other indicators of radicalization or extremism, and when the individual(s) do not use conventional navigation tools found in the most common mobile apps, special attention must be given. The reasons for avoiding standard technological tools should be clarified, and the individual's profile should be further examined in the context of terrorism.

3.1. Some illegal migrants not only use atypical navigation apps but also carry specific heraldry or clothing that differs from the standard attire used for travel or for blending in as a migrant in large European cities. Examples include religious or prayer-related Islamic vests, traditional Arab garments such as thawbs, keffiyehs, shemagh scarves, and bisht robes. These specific garments, which reflect a strong attachment to traditionalism and nationalism, are a sign that the individual is willing to risk exposure or remain under threat, rather than give up their traditional identity for the sake of integrating into Western societies. Items such as flags and specialized prayer items—like prayer rugs, bracelets, and other ritual objects—have also been discovered. Though inconvenient for travel, these are carried due to the migrant's strong religious identity[14].

4. Video, photo, and online activity modeled after influencers. Certain illegal migrants have been identified with large volumes of content intended for online religious propaganda targeted at specific groups, including through overt and public channels. In such content, they recite passages from the Holy Quran, attempt to inspire other followers, and describe their journey. In some cases, it has been found that the Balkan route is referred to as “The Path of the Martyrs,” elevating their movement to grandiose, religious, and epic proportions.

4.1. This form of creating an epic narrative around the process of illegal migration indicates that the migrant is driven by deep religious and ideological motives for their journey. Such a person is not an economic migrant or someone fleeing war, and it is highly likely that these different motives reflect a different type of personal affiliation with religious groups or organizations, potentially exploited by extremists.

5. A hierarchical level of organization or relationships, nonverbal behavior. Some migrants, particularly young men, display signs of social and personal interaction that place them in hierarchical and low-upward relationships. Examples include all indicators from their nonverbal behavior—when a certain individual stands as the center of a circle, the distance maintained from them, their commanding presence over the others, or the group standing in straight lines,

formations, precise figures, overly arranged belongings, thousand-yard stare or deep, lost gaze, and other indicators of that type[15].

5.1. Such relationships suggest that a particular individual in the group acts as a clear leader, and their control or authority is not only based on personal qualities or the current situation but represents a form of representative power. This may be due to their higher religious, military, or criminal rank within a religious community, military formation, or organized criminal group. When such relationships are present and are also characterized by specific pre-developed skills—as described above—there are indications that the group members may have undergone some form of military or other training. These relationships require the development of habits such as standing in lines or rows without being ordered to do so, and other behaviors typical of individuals from militarized structures. Additional signs include extremely well-developed skills in managing personal belongings, usually developed in military or paramilitary structures, and a deep gaze characteristic of individuals who have participated in active combat as a result of experiencing violence or intense psychological stress[16].

6. Characteristic and identical marks in unusual areas of the body. Traces of war and combat. Tattoos. In micro-groups of illegal migrants, part of larger migrant flows, multiple marks have been found located in identical areas on the body. These include symbols, letters, texts, or simply matching geometrical shapes. For example, marks located in the area between the elbow and the shoulder of the illegal migrants. There have also been documented cases of stab wounds, cuts, or gunshot injuries.

6.1. In the case of identical markings, there is a clear indication of group affiliation among the individuals—either because they were victims of violence, abuse, or torture, or because they belong to a religious group or combat unit to which they show allegiance. In one scenario, they may have been opponents of extremists or militias from a certain faction, or may have been tortured for perceived disloyalty or other behavior. In another scenario, they may belong to such a group and be marked intentionally as a sign of masculinity and loyalty.

6.2. War-related injuries, on the other hand, indicate that the individual has participated in combat operations. Given the conditions of warfare in the Middle East and the lack of international monitoring and control organizations, it is highly likely that the person may have committed war crimes. Even if that is not the case, such an individual should be separated and thoroughly assessed, as they may pose a threat to law-abiding citizens and other illegal migrants, considering the unknown psychological consequences of the conflict and military activity they have experienced.

6.3. Religious tattoos, heraldic symbols such as bracelets, medallions, and others on the body or elsewhere indicate a specific affiliation and attachment of the individual to the object depicted on their body. In such cases, the content, type, and nature of the tattoo or heraldic item should be clarified and profiled to determine whether it is connected to religious movements and extremism or represents a normal form of self-expression [17].

7. In-depth examination of personal belongings of illegal migrants has revealed specific editions of the Holy Quran published by extremist-affiliated publishers. These editions are often named after well-known Islamic historical figures or prophets, glorified by radical Islam, especially within ultra-conservative movements such as Wahhabism or Salafism, or other Sunni or Shia sects [18].

7.1. The edition and translation of the Holy Book of Islam are important, as they influence the interpretation and teachings of specific sacred texts. Depending on the publisher, one can determine the religious affiliation of the book's owner, and from there, draw conclusions about their worldview and understanding. In the case of ultra-orthodox movements such as Wahhabism, the individual is in a state of religious radicalization relative to the culture and order of the Western world. Wahhabism is the main religious-ideological foundation of the terrorist organization Islamic State and its affiliates.

8. Explicit political, video, and photographic content with anti-state and anti-Western propaganda. Mobile devices of illegal migrants have been found to contain propaganda videos with clear anti-state or highly religious extremist content. These are directed against specific

communities, Western leaders, and relate to particular events such as military interventions, current armed conflicts, and others involving countries from the European Union and NATO. Such videos have often been hidden in concealed folders or protected with specialized locking software. Some of the discovered videos included audio recordings of Quranic chanting, messages against the political leadership of Israel, footage of the aftermath of bombings in Palestine, and texts with religious content.

8.1. The expression of an anti-state view—especially when characterized by highly emotional content combined with divine epic elements from religion and specific political messages—indicates that the individual does not support the societies and political systems of the countries to which they have migrated, and is driven by other motives during their stay. The rejection of certain political decisions should be considered in the context of propaganda with religious and emotionally engaging personal narratives conveyed through the videos themselves, rather than as a mere expression of free political position.



Figure №1. Mind map of the risk indicators for radicalization and terrorist affiliation among the illegal immigrants.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Develop an algorithm covering multiple levels of investigation and intelligence gathering for each member of an illegal migrant group, as well as for the micro-groups as a whole. A successful approach includes the following steps:

1. Conduct a thorough inspection of the carried belongings of the illegal migrants, such as backpacks, bags or other;
2. Conduct a detailed inspection of the personal items and objects carried on their bodies, such mobile phones, books, personal items or other;
3. Carry out an in-depth examination of the external physical features of the illegal migrant for signs of violence, traces of participation in armed conflict, tattoos, or concealed objects under clothing.
4. Conduct a detailed examination of the mobile device of the illegal migrant. Contacts in the phonebook should be reviewed, particularly for country codes matching the host country or

other countries of interest. All geolocation applications should be checked. All photo and video material should be examined, including recently deleted files. Notes stored on the device should be reviewed. The individual's messaging and social media activity should be analyzed. If necessary, translation apps from the leading intelligence officer phone should be used for understanding content in foreign languages.

5. Once all information from points 1 through 4 has been collected, an intelligence interview should be conducted with the individual.

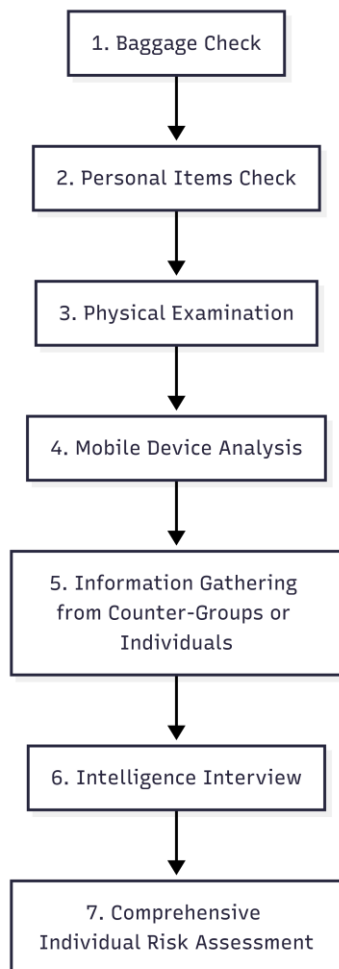


Figure №2. Counter-intelligence algorithm for detection of high-risk individuals

The described algorithm applies to the personal luggage, belongings, and mobile device of each person individually. These steps should be coordinated among the police and intelligence personnel involved, with intelligence officers given priority engagement according to their area of competence and professional expertise.

II. Inform the supporting and security personnel about your objectives. If possible, assign an officer to observe the group while work is being conducted with individual members. Instruct the guarding personnel to monitor for specific behaviors as described in point 5 of the previous chapter, such as the exchange of items or other unusual actions. Do not allow communication between the illegal migrants during the initial profiling, intelligence and investigations procedures. Inform any medical personnel involved if there is any and communicate your interest in injuries on the bodies of the illegal migrants, with reference to the characteristics listed in point 6 of the previous chapter.

III. Do not conduct work with individual persons of the illegal immigrants in front of the entire group. If possible, after each individual is called and the work with them is completed, they should be moved to a separate room to prevent them from warning or preparing the others.

IV. Tag the belongings, particularly the mobile devices, as soon as possible. Photograph or mark each mobile device with a

sticker early on to identify its owner, so that later on, during the intelligence interviews, each illegal migrant is directly linked to their personal belongings. This will help avoid operationally significant items being classified as unclaimed or items that no individual is willing to admit ownership of.

V. Seek cooperation from vulnerable or potentially cooperative members of the group. If necessary—divide and conquer. If you identify several micro-groups within the larger group, request information from one group about the others. Express concern, if applicable, that you suspect some individuals in another group may be dangerous, and ask for assistance in distinguishing between them. Request information that can help prove the safe background of the cooperative individuals. If needed, it is not excluded to ask directly and publicly whether any members of the group have served in military formations or militias—observe and assign a staff member of your team to monitor the specific reactions following your question.

VI. Verify the origin and ability of the illegal migrant to present their past. Engage them on religious-political topics, using compassion and empathy toward the issues in the Middle East,

along with your solid knowledge and respect for Islam. Your goal is to determine whether the person has in-depth knowledge—and why they possess it—about religion and the political situation, or whether they are a traditional believer with only a superficial understanding of international affairs.

VII. Verify the information presented to you. If the person claims to belong to the Shia/Sunni denomination, ask them to name specific preachers or historical figures from Shia or Sunni Islam. Ask them to describe—or draw—the flag of the country they claim to come from, name the national anthem, or provide other publicly known information that would reasonably be expected from a citizen of that country or a follower of that denomination to know. Check whether the information given aligns with the relevant religious community and the specific political context of the country in question.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The comprehensive analysis presented in this report demonstrates that systematic intelligence methodologies can effectively identify security threats within illegal migrant populations, providing critical capabilities for protecting national security while maintaining operational effectiveness.

The research findings establish eight distinct categories of indicators that serve as reliable markers for potential radicalization, extremism, or terrorist affiliation among illegal migrants. These indicators, ranging from technological evidence to behavioral patterns, have been validated through operational experience and demonstrate consistent reliability across diverse operational contexts.

The proposed algorithmic approach represents a significant advancement in intelligence gathering methodologies, providing structured procedures that enhance both the accuracy of threat identification and the efficiency of operational processes. The systematic seven-step protocol ensures comprehensive assessment while maintaining operational security and minimizing the risk of oversight.

The intelligence picture revealed through this analysis confirms that illegal migration serves as a vector for individuals with diverse motivations, including those with potential security implications. The identification of hierarchical organizational structures, specialized equipment, and ideological content within migrant groups indicates the presence of coordinated elements that require sophisticated counter-intelligence responses.

The operational recommendations developed through this research provide immediate practical value for intelligence professionals, offering evidence-based procedures that have been tested in real-world scenarios. The emphasis on technological forensics, behavioral analysis, and systematic documentation ensures that security assessments are conducted with scientific rigor and operational effectiveness.

The implications of this research extend beyond immediate operational applications, contributing to the theoretical understanding of radicalization processes and providing empirical evidence for policy development in the domains of migration management and counter-terrorism strategy.

This investigation demonstrates that rigorous scientific methodology, when combined with operational experience and classified intelligence insights, can produce actionable intelligence products that directly enhance national security capabilities while advancing academic understanding of complex security phenomena.

The validation of these methodologies through operational practice confirms their reliability and establishes a foundation for future research in the critical intersection of migration studies in the domain of the complex security environment of the modern world and the threats against the peace and security of the European citizens.

In an era characterized by unprecedented global instability, hybrid warfare tactics, and multifaceted security challenges, the development of scientifically validated intelligence methodologies becomes essential for preserving the democratic values and ensuring the safety of European societies.

The practical application of these research findings directly contributes to the enhancement of collective security mechanisms, supporting the fundamental mission of protecting civilian populations while maintaining the principles of human dignity and international law that define the European security architecture.

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