

Tackling threats, addressing challenges

Europol's response to migrant smuggling and trafficking
in human beings in 2023 and onwards





TACKLING THREATS, ADDRESSING CHALLENGES - EUROPOL'S RESPONSE TO MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS IN 2023 AND ONWARDS

PDF | ISBN 978-92-95236-33-2 | ISSN 2600-3287 | DOI: 10.2813/203212 | QL-AP-24-001-EN-N

Neither the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation nor any person acting on behalf of the agency is responsible for the use that might be made of the following information.

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024

© European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2024

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the copyright of the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

While best efforts have been made to trace and acknowledge all copyright holders, Europol would like to apologise should there have been any errors or omissions. Please do contact us if you possess any further information relating to the images published or their rights holder.

Cite this publication: Europol (2024), Tackling threats, addressing challenges - Europol's response to migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in 2023 and onwards, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

This publication and more information on Europol are available on the Internet.

www.europol.europa.eu



Contents

A multifaceted response to a complex and dynamic criminal environment	3
EMSC responses and results in 2023	5
Migrant smuggling and THB – main threats and challenges	6
An interconnected criminal environment – links to other crime areas and crime enablers	6
Flexibility and adaptability of criminal networks	8
Geopolitical developments impacting migrant smuggling and THB	9
Cross-border criminal cooperation	10
Increasing levels of violence	10
The digital fight against migrant smuggling and THB	12
Endnotes	14

A multifaceted response to a complex and dynamic criminal environment

Migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings (THB) pose a serious threat to the EU's security, as well as to the irregular migrants and THB victims involved. Both crime areas are embedded in the broader serious and organised crime environment, with criminals taking advantage of existing infrastructures and engaging in multiple illegal activities.

The criminals involved in these crime areas constantly adapt their methods to maximise profits and evade law enforcement. Geopolitical events, economic and social crises, as well as the digital environment, have provided new opportunities for criminals to exploit.

Against the backdrop of irregular migration at EU's external borders reaching in 2023 the highest levels since 2016, **Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC)** is at the forefront of the EU's fight against migrant smuggling, supporting EU Member States in disrupting the criminal networks that orchestrate this form of organised crime.

The EMSC also continues to stand together with law enforcement in EU Member States to combat the criminal exploitation of vulnerable people for the purpose of economic gain.

The EMSC's mandate is first and foremost to provide operational support to cross-border investigations in the Member States, but also to deliver expertise and resources, as well as a platform for the swift and safe exchange of information.

The successful operations supported by the EMSC reflect the pivotal role played by law enforcement authorities in the Member States in sharing information and initiating cross-border investigations, as well as the importance of joining efforts at EU level and beyond, to disrupt criminal networks active in migrant smuggling and THB.

OTFS TARGETING THE KEY CRIMINAL ACTORS BEHIND MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND THB

Dedicated Operational Task Forces (OTFs)¹ streamline the efforts of Member States and operational partners in identifying and investigating High Value Targets and dismantling the most threatening criminal networks orchestrating migrant smuggling and THB.

In addition to the operational support provided, EMSC experts take part in multiple platforms, such as EMPACT, and actively participate in information exchange and crisis response initiatives. Furthermore, the EMSC continues to engage in EU dialogues to bring third countries closer in the fight against migrant smuggling and THB.

In November 2023, the EU Commission launched the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, aiming to strengthen the EU's tools in the fight against migrant smuggling. This initiative seeks to reinforce Europol and the EMSC's role and improve inter-agency cooperation. To step up international efforts in countering migrant smuggling, the initiative will enhance coordination between liaison officers and boost capabilities for monitoring, reporting and supporting investigations.

EMSC responses and results in 2023

		AP Migrant smuggling	AP Phoenix
Operational support	Number of operations supported	164	59
	Number of Action Days	45	23
	OTFs supported	8	3
	Number of Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) where EMSC participated	3	3
Information exchange	Number of accepted contributions	14 738	2 878
Analytical support	Operational reports	999	232

Migrant smuggling and THB – main threats and challenges

An interconnected criminal environment – links to other crime areas and crime enablers

Criminal networks active in migrant smuggling and THB engage in other crime areas to boost profits and facilitate their activities. Although such links are not structural, some of the EMSC-supported investigations revealed ties to drug or firearms trafficking, among others. Links between migrant smuggling and terrorism remain of particular concern, as terrorist elements may use the services offered by migrant smugglers to enter the EU. Moreover, profits from migrant smuggling can be used to finance terrorist activities², compounding the threat to the EU's security.

Connections also exist between migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. Particularly when long and expensive journeys are involved, irregular migrants can end up exploited for the debt of the smuggling fees, either by the criminal networks facilitating their travels or by other criminal groups with which the smugglers cooperate.

VIETNAMESE NATIONALS SMUGGLED AND EXPLOITED

The members of a criminal network using fraudulently obtained work visas to smuggle Vietnamese nationals through the EU and across the English Channel to the UK, also exploited irregular migrants both en route and upon arrival at the destination. In return for reduced smuggling fees, Vietnamese nationals were subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, or were used as drug mules.³

To enable migrant smuggling and THB, criminal networks make use of various **criminal activities and services, and abuse legal instruments.**

In a large share of the investigations supported by the EMSC, law enforcement confirmed that migrant smugglers and human traffickers are using fraudulent documents to get irregular migrants and THB victims into the EU, or legalise their stay once they are there. Completely counterfeited documents, altered or look-alike original documents, which have often been lost or stolen, are widely traded on illegal online marketplaces.

Fraudulent documents are also available for direct purchase in transit hubs where irregular migrants gather in large numbers, awaiting to continue their journeys to destination countries in the EU.

DOCUMENT FORGERS COOPERATE TO ENABLE IRREGULAR MIGRANTS TO ENTER THE EU BY AIR

A criminal network based in Greece, producing high-quality travel and identification documents, was dismantled in 2023 with support from the EMSC. The forgers ran independent print shops but often collaborated and shared logistics. The suspects also offered complete air smuggling packages, including fraudulent documents and plane tickets, for a fee of EUR 6 000 per person. More than 50 air smuggling cases were linked to this network.⁴



Source: Hellenic Police/Europol, Almost 5 000 false identity documents seized in Greece

Moreover, various **legal business structures** set up or infiltrated by migrant smuggling and THB networks are misused to facilitate recruitment, travel and other logistics. Legal business structures are also used as front organisations for money laundering, exploitation of victims, or to obtain documents enabling individuals to enter or stay in the EU.

Migrant smugglers operating on the exit sea route to the UK across the English Channel continued to rely on criminal groups providing them with boats and other nautical equipment, as a service. However, in some instances, the larger smuggling networks arranged their own **logistics**, demonstrating their vast operational capabilities.

SMUGGLING VIA THE ENGLISH CHANNEL TO THE UK

In 2023, an OTF focused on migrant smuggling through the EU via the English Channel, resulted in the arrest of the key players of what is believed to be one of the largest criminal networks facilitating irregular migrants along this route. The network, comprised of Iraqi and Syrian nationals of Kurdish origin, smuggled Middle Eastern and East African irregular migrants from France to the UK, crowding large groups of irregular migrants in low-quality, unsafe small boats.⁵



Source: Europol, 39 arrests in cross-border operation against migrant smuggling in small boats across English Channel

Flexibility and adaptability of criminal networks

Migrant smugglers are resourceful and agile. They flexibly allocate resources, change routes and adapt their *modi operandi* to respond to demand and external developments. Their reactions are swift, demonstrating not only business awareness, but also a strong logistical setup and significant resources allowing them to easily adjust their business models.

Criminal networks adjusting routes and modi operandi:

*Migrant smuggling networks scaled up their operations by using large-capacity vessels to smuggle **a higher number of irregular migrants into the EU**. Boats carrying large groups of irregular migrants are frequently detected on the Mediterranean routes into the EU, as well as on the route to the UK, across the English Channel.*

*Criminal networks have been abusing **visa-free regimes** in EU neighbouring countries to facilitate irregular migration into the*

territory of the Member States. The criminal networks demonstrated a high level of responsiveness to changes in visa regimes and shifted to other routes or adapted their methods to smuggle irregular migrants.

Following a decisive intervention from authorities against criminal networks active in the Western Balkan region, smugglers who were initially active at the Hungarian-Serbian border shifted, at the end of 2023, to sub-routes passing through Croatia and Slovenia.

Human traffickers display a similar level of flexibility in their operations. These criminal networks often set up call centres and systematically rotate victims from one country to another⁶ to avoid detection.

Geopolitical developments impacting migrant smuggling and THB

Instability at EU's eastern borders driven by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, coupled with alleged attempts from state actors to exploit crises to push irregular migration to the EU via Russia and Belarus, attracted new waves of non-regional irregular migrants at EU's eastern borders, aiming to move forward to the EU. The geopolitical situation fuelled an increase in demand for smuggling services. Smugglers quickly deployed resources to the region and launched large-scale online campaigns to advertise their services and recruit collaborators. In parallel, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine provided new opportunities for THB criminal networks to take advantage of vulnerable individuals seeking refuge in the EU.

The EMSC invested significant resources to monitor the situation and support the affected countries, in particular those bordering Ukraine. EMSC experts were deployed to the region, alongside guest officers, and multiple investigations were opened by national law enforcement authorities targeting the criminal networks exploiting the crisis.

CRIMINAL NETWORKS EXPLOITING INSTABILITY ON THE EU EASTERN BORDERS, DISMANTLED THROUGH OTFS

An OTF set up in February 2022 to target a criminal network smuggling irregular migrants via Russia and Belarus to the EU, resulted in the arrest of nine High-Value Targets. The OTF continued in 2023 and 21 members of another large criminal network smuggling non-regional irregular migrants via Belarus and Russia, were arrested.⁷

Cross-border criminal cooperation

Cooperation between criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and THB is widespread across jurisdictions on the routes into the EU. Criminals cooperate, share resources and divide tasks, from handling recruitment in countries of origin, organising transport and accommodation, to orchestrating the exploitation of victims or facilitating the legalisation of stay in the EU.

In the absence of cooperation with third countries along smuggling and trafficking routes, identifying the leaders of criminal networks remains challenging, particularly as EU law enforcement action is often limited to low-level facilitators, such as the skippers of vessels moving the irregular migrants into the EU.

Community, language, ethnicity and culture often connect smugglers to irregular migrants and traffickers to their victims. These connections pose additional challenges for law enforcement due to the close-knit nature of such communities, leading to difficulties in obtaining actionable information.

MULTIPLE CRIMINAL ORGANISATIONS SMUGGLING AND EXPLOITING CHINESE NATIONALS, TAKEN DOWN IN CONNECTED INVESTIGATIONS

In 2023, two criminal organisations smuggling and exploiting over 1 000 Chinese nationals in Spain were dismantled. The two criminal networks worked together to smuggle Chinese nationals via marriages of convenience and fake work contracts, later subjecting them to sexual exploitation.⁸

This case was connected to an OTF supported by Europol since 2020, which resulted in the dismantling of one of Europe's largest Chinese criminal networks involved in sexual exploitation.⁹ Additional links were uncovered via another operation targeting a criminal network trafficking human beings for sexual and labour exploitation in Spain.¹⁰

Increasing levels of violence

Although violence is intrinsic to the exploitation phase of THB and not an inherent feature of migrant smuggling, migrant smugglers are becoming visibly more violent, while human traffickers have shifted to deploy more manipulative tactics to recruit victims and maintain their compliance.

Migrant smugglers use violence or threat thereof, against irregular migrants, often to extort them or force them or their families to pay additional smuggling fees. The lives of irregular migrants continue to be endangered due to unsafe means of transportation and concealment.

*The practice of **overcrowding vessels** and using **unsafe boats**, combined with the inherent risks of smuggling by sea, led to record numbers of fatalities among irregular migrants in 2023. Deaths occurred across the main entry sea routes into the EU, for example on the Central Mediterranean or Atlantic routes, as well as on the sea route to the UK, across the English Channel.*

*The Western Balkan routes are among the most dangerous land routes for irregular migrants, with **life-threatening transport and concealment** methods used by smugglers frequently leading to casualties. Operations supported by Europol in 2023 targeted criminal networks that were cramming groups of irregular migrants into unsuitable vehicles¹¹ or transporting them in dangerous hiding places.¹²*



Source: Europol, 92 charged in bust targeting migrant smugglers in Bulgaria

To avoid detection, smugglers often drive recklessly. This continues to cause fatal accidents, killing or seriously injuring not only irregular migrants but often the facilitators themselves or law enforcement.

Moreover, some members of criminal networks employ direct violence against law enforcement, for example at land border crossing points, while attempting to pose as irregular migrants.

Criminal networks also employ violence against their competitors as a way to maintain or gain control over regional markets. Some of the migrant smuggling networks operating in the Western Balkan region are believed to be among the most violent in Europe. Similarly, criminal networks active on the route to the UK across the English Channel have, in some instances, resorted to violence against competitors. Law enforcement often seize weapons, including firearms, from smugglers active on smuggling routes into and through the EU. Weapons also feature in videos advertising facilitation services, posted online by migrant smugglers.¹³

The increasing levels of violence displayed by criminal networks active on the Western Balkan routes confirm the need for a more focused, regional approach to investigations. Deriving from the OTF concept, **Regional Operational Task Forces** were implemented in key migrant smuggling hubs to further concentrate law enforcement action and direct Europol's support to the countries directly affected.

The digital fight against migrant smuggling and THB

Technology and the online environment are integral to the business models of criminal networks active in migrant smuggling and THB.

Criminals rely on mainstream **social media platforms** to advertise their services and recruit facilitators, irregular migrants and THB victims. **Instant messaging applications** are often used as a second step, to exchange operational details in a safer environment.

Online campaigns launched by migrant smuggling networks to recruit collaborators are sophisticated and professional. They have a wide geographic scope and occasionally target entire groups of drivers in one call. In their advertisements, the organisers provide detailed information on work conditions and promise lucrative financial rewards and various other advantages, such as support in case of apprehension, vehicles and accommodation.¹⁴

Cryptocurrencies are used by human traffickers to collect, move and launder illicit profits. While cash payments still prevail as the preferred means of payment in migrant smuggling, cryptocurrencies are becoming more popular among migrant smugglers as well. The use of cryptocurrencies enables criminals to go undetected when receiving smuggling fees and paying commission to drivers. **Traditional Hawala systems in conjunction with cryptocurrencies** allow smugglers to exploit both modern and traditional methods to launder profits, while maintaining a higher level of anonymity.

EMSC experts are working together with specialists in Europol's EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) to monitor online activities related to migrant smuggling. Moreover, the EMSC regularly participates in large-scale exercises to scan the online environment for signals of THB, to generate investigative leads and good practices.

THIRD HACKATHON SCANNING THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT FOR THB

The 2023 edition of the THB Hackathon entailed a three-day operational action involving law enforcement from 26 countries (22 EU Member States and 4 third countries), as well as representatives from the European Labour Authority, CEPOL, INTERPOL, the OSCE and the International Justice Mission. The exercise aimed to identify online platforms used to recruit victims for sexual and labour exploitation, with a particular focus on vulnerable Ukrainian and Chinese victims.¹⁵

Applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) may deliver new opportunities for criminals to lure potential clients and THB victims. Disinformation campaigns and deepfakes can be employed to mobilise irregular migrants and increase demand for the services of migrant smugglers.

Together with dedicated expertise and tools, concerted efforts of all stakeholders involved in the fight against migrant smuggling and THB are critical to the success of investigations.

Under the umbrella of the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, the EMSC hosted in 2024 the first thematic meeting "Tackling migrant smuggling in the digital domain". The meeting brought together more than 100 experts from EU Member States, as well as from partner countries, agencies and international organisations, to discuss and identify the most effective responses to migrant smuggling enabled by the use of online platforms. Participants agreed on the need to further enhance the technical capabilities of investigators and to create an EU network of trained experts to make optimal use of information obtained from the online domain, to fight migrant smuggling. Furthermore, strengthened cooperation between law enforcement, the judiciary and private parties remains crucial for successfully disrupting criminal networks integrating digital elements in their business models.

Endnotes

¹Operational Task Forces (OTFs) are temporary groups of representatives of competent authorities of the Member States and Europol, based on a multi-national and multi-disciplinary approach and formed to carry out a specific project, coordinating intelligence and investigative efforts focusing on the criminal activities of one or more High Value Target(s) and members of their criminal network. Third Countries and other Europol Operational Partners may be invited, should it be deemed legally possible and operationally necessary by the Member States.

²Europol, April 2024, 21 arrested in hit against migrant smuggling across the EU-Russian border, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/21-arrested-in-hit-against-migrant-smuggling-across-eu-russian-border>

³Europol, April 2024, 16 arrests as Vietnamese network smuggling migrants across the English Channel busted, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/16-arrests-vietnamese-network-smuggling-migrants-across-english-channel-busted>

⁴Europol, March 2024, Almost 5 000 false identity documents seized in Greece, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/almost-5-000-false-identity-documents-seized-in-greece>

⁵Europol, February 2024, Five High Value Targets arrested as one of the largest networks smuggling migrants across the English Channel halted, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/five-high-value-targets-arrested-one-of-largest-networks-smuggling-migrants-across-english-channel-halted>

⁶Europol April 2023, 90 victims of sexual exploitation identified, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/90-victims-of-sexual-exploitation-identified>

⁷Europol, April 2023, 21 arrested in hit against migrant smuggling across the EU-Russian border, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/21-arrested-in-hit-against-migrant-smuggling-across-eu-russian-border>

⁸Europol, May 2024, Double blow: two criminal organisations smuggling Chinese nationals taken down, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/double-blow-two-criminal-organisations-smuggling-chinese-nationals-taken-down>

⁹Europol, February 2023, 28 arrested as Europe's biggest Chinese prostitution ring is dismantled, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/28-arrested-europes-biggest-chinese-prostitution-ring-dismantled>

¹⁰Europol, March 2024, 13 victims of human trafficking safeguarded in Spain, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/13-victims-of-human-trafficking-safeguarded-in-spain>

¹¹Europol, March 2024, 42 arrested for smuggling migrants across the Danube, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/42-arrested-for-smuggling-migrants-across-danube>

¹²Europol, March 2024, 19 smugglers arrested in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/19-smugglers-arrested-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-croatia>

¹³Information available in Europol

¹⁴Information available in Europol

¹⁵Europol, October 2023, Targeted: human traffickers luring victims online, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/targeted-human-traffickers-luring-victims-online>