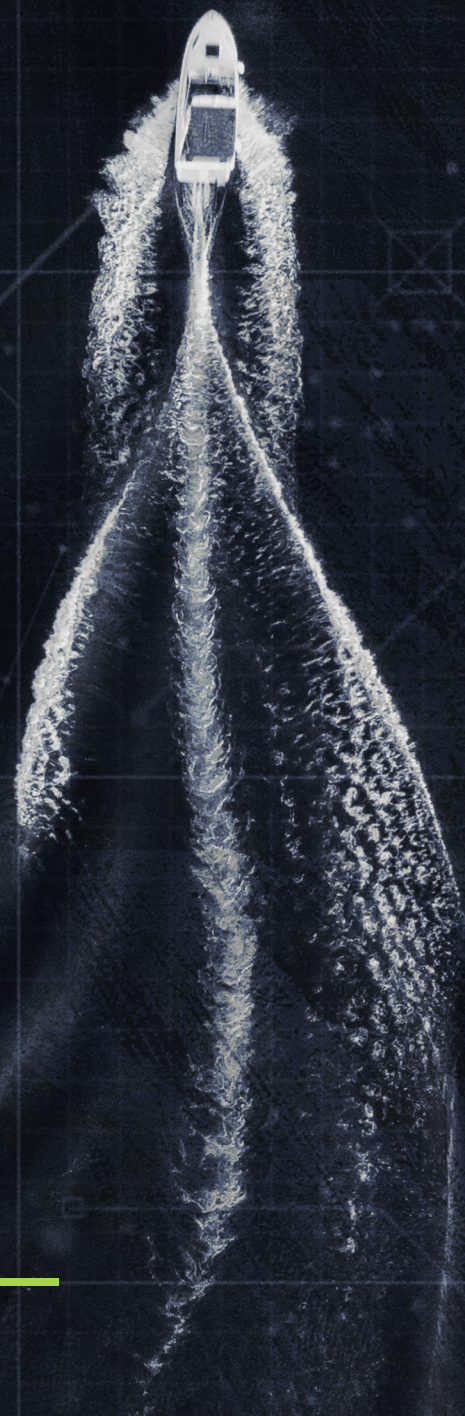




2022

**EUROPEAN
MIGRANT
SMUGGLING
CENTRE**

6TH ANNUAL REPORT



EMSC
European Migrant
Smuggling Centre



EUROPEAN MIGRANT SMUGGLING CENTRE 6th ANNUAL REPORT – 2022

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022

PDF QL-AP-22-001-EN-N ISBN: 978-92-95220-38-6 ISSN: 2600-3287 DOI: 10.2813/61347

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Cite this publication: Europol (2022), European Migrant Smuggling Centre
6th Annual Report 2022 , Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

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01. Foreword

Catherine De Bolle

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPOL

I am pleased to present the sixth edition of the annual report of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC).

Migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings (THB) continue to be among the most serious crime threats facing the European Union (EU). This was once more confirmed by Europol's EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) 2021, and is further reflected in the designation of both of these criminal activities as priorities for the European Multi-Disciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) Cycle 2022 – 2025.

Criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling are dynamic and adaptable. In 2021, smuggling activities along established and well-known routes continued almost undeterred by COVID-19 travel restrictions. Migrant smuggling hotspots emerged along the EU's external border with Belarus and on the English Channel, resulting in tragic loss of lives. Human traffickers have moved most of their operations to the online domain, and continue to target and exploit vulnerable victims. The victims have diverse profiles and originate from within and from outside of the EU.

To tackle these persistent threats, the EMSC has continuously evolved since its inception, and has expanded its range of activities in order to provide the best support to EU Member States. The EMSC acts as a dynamic platform for operational cooperation, the exchange of information, and coordination between the Member States and partners engaged in the fight against migrant smuggling and the trafficking in human beings.

Throughout its existence, the EMSC's dedicated experts and analysts have supported over 800 priority investigations into criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. Since 2016, over 27 000 new cases were reported to the EMSC.

Against this volume of cases, the trust of our stakeholders was built up through a long series of operational successes and is reflected in the steady increase in the volume and quality of information received and processed at the EMSC. This information supported cross-border investigations into criminal activities and criminal networks, and was the backbone of our analytical support to Member States and external partners. Since 2016, EMSC analysts delivered more than 4 500 operational analysis reports, as well as regular monitoring reports and strategic assessments, providing a deeper insight into the mechanisms of the migrant smuggling industry.

Migrant smuggling networks, human traffickers and their facilitators will continue to ruthlessly exploit the hopes and aspirations of irregular migrants and the victims of THB for a better life. However, the EMSC's record of accomplishments gives me confidence that Europol will continue to contribute to concrete and substantial advances in the fight against serious and organised crime in the EU.



Robert Crepinko

HEAD OF UNIT, EMSC

2021 saw an increase of smuggling activities on all main entry routes into Europe. After several years of steady decreases in the number of the people being smuggled into the European Union, we witnessed a steep increase. The restrictions imposed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have had no impact on the criminal activities of the smugglers. New emerging routes, new technologies and new modus operandi all forced law enforcement agencies to be better prepared and more vigilant than ever.

Now in its sixth year of operations, the European Migrant Smuggling Centre again recorded an increased level of engagement with law enforcement agencies. The high number of dynamic and complex investigations the Centre supported across Europe, and worldwide, showed that only through international cooperation can we counter criminals who are exploiting irregular migrants and vulnerable victims of trafficking.

There are numerous reasons to believe that the law enforcement community has never been better connected, better trained, or better equipped to counter the criminal activities of migrant smugglers and human traffickers. Yet there is still a lot to be done. Rapid technological developments in particular are forcing Europol's EMSC to join forces in order to shape new investigative techniques. Europol remains the perfect platform for fostering law enforcement innovations.

The European Migrant Smuggling Centre continues to play a pivotal role in tackling migrant smuggling and trafficking

in human beings. Having led the Centre since its inception, I am very proud of the achievements of the network of law enforcement experts that we support. I also know that the Centre must maintain its dynamic approach and continue to evolve.

The expertise and commitment I have seen from the Centre's staff give me confidence that they are ready for the challenges ahead.



02. EMSC activities and performance indicators

While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented travel restrictions, criminal networks active in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings have continued to thrive, displaying a high degree of adaptability. Europol's operational support and services have been increasingly requested as a result, despite the challenges to provide on-the-spot support because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The volume of activities carried out in the two Analysis Projects (APs) dedicated to tackling migrant smuggling (AP Migrant Smuggling) and trafficking in human beings (AP Phoenix), was in line with an increased information flow from the Member States and our partner countries. Both AP Migrant Smuggling and AP Phoenix are fully focused on implementing and supporting operational activities within the various EMPACT Operational Action Plans (OAPs), significantly framing and driving the EMSC's impulses.

The overall increase in most performance indicators has naturally driven a similar evolution of the results achieved, underlining once more the pivotal role played by Europol as a platform for operational cooperation and for sharing expertise and information. Experts

from the EMSC participated in 45 action days dedicated to tackling migrant smuggling in the EU and their support has led to the identification of 24 high-value targets (HVTs).

2021 EMPACT ACTION DAYS TARGETING THB CRIMINAL NETWORKS

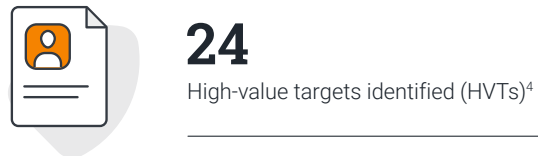
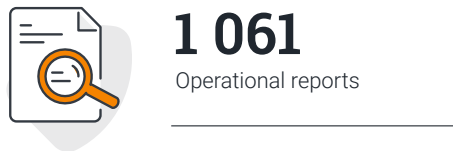
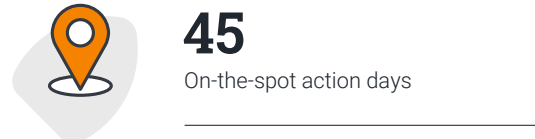
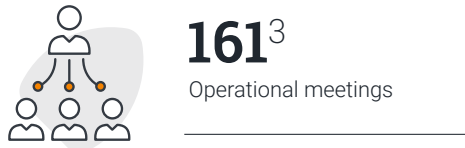
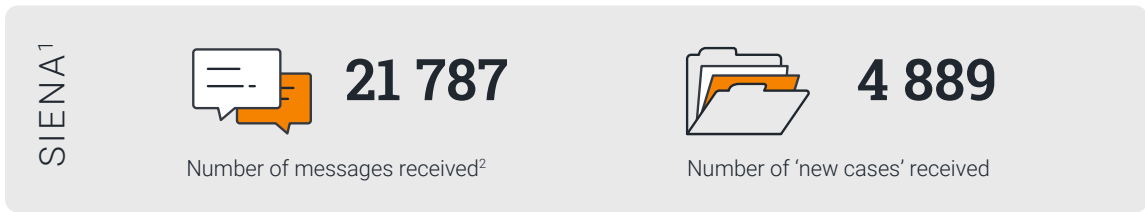
Between 8 and 12 November 2021, AP Phoenix and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, supported large-scale international actions against THB involving 29 countries and led by authorities in Austria and Romania. The action days aimed to combat human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced criminality and forced begging. More than 14 000 officers targeted trafficking routes on roads and at airports. This resulted in 212 arrests and the identification of 89 suspects. The action days took place under the umbrella of the EMPACT security mechanism/framework.¹



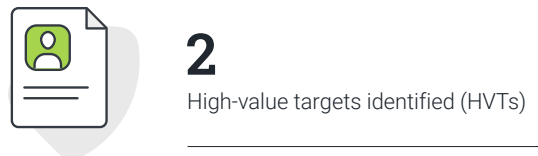
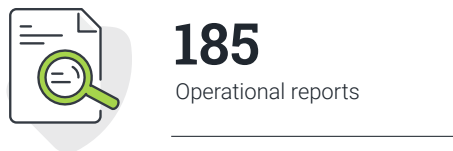
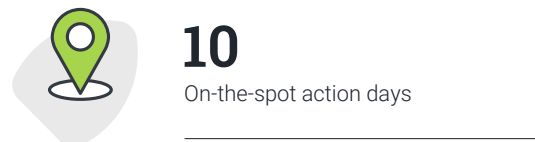
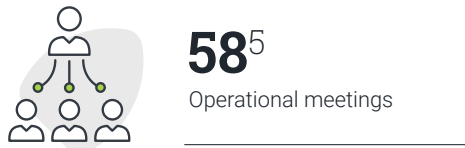
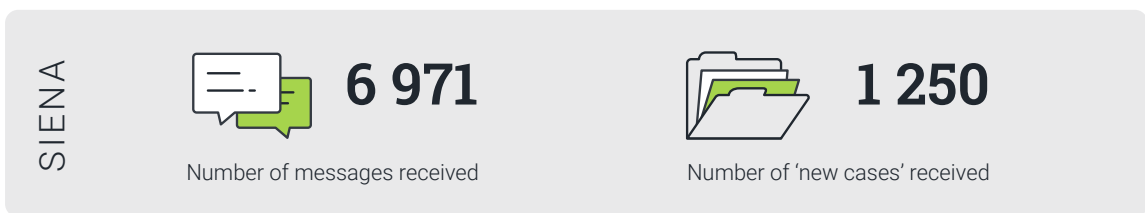
In 2015, at the height of the migration crisis in Europe, Europol set up the Europol Monitoring Team (EPMT) to monitor and report on migration flows towards EU countries. The aim was to generate and continuously update the intelligence picture on migratory movements, and thus, to enable the most affected destination countries in the EU to prepare for expected arrivals of irregular migrants and connected organised crime activities. In the last few years, the focus of the EPMT has shifted to a more general intelligence picture on migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. The monitoring activity carried out under this framework materialised in the Europol Monitoring Team Report, currently issued on a weekly basis and disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. In 2021, the report celebrated its 500th edition and remains one of the most comprehensive tools to inform EU Members States and Europol's partners on developments in the area of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings.



AP MIGRANT SMUGGLING: Facilitated illegal immigration



AP PHOENIX: Trafficking in human beings



1. The Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) is a state-of-the-art tool designed to enable swift, secure and user-friendly communication and exchange of operational and strategic crime-related information and intelligence between Europol, Member States and Third Parties.
2. Initial messages/cases contributed to Europol via SIENA.
3. 37 physical, 124 online.
4. High-value targets: a high-value target is defined as a person whose criminal activity fulfils the criteria listed in Chapter 3.3 of the 'Standard Operating Procedure for Selection of High Value Targets and Establishment of Operational Task Forces within Europol' and therefore constitutes a high risk of serious and organised crime to two or more EU Member States.
5. 47 online meetings, 11 physical meetings.

03. Migrant smuggling

Migrant smuggling has been a key activity for criminals and will remain so, as long as there is the demand for facilitation services and opportunities for profit. Criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling are adaptable and responsive to changes in their environment, and are flexible in the routes and modi operandi used. Furthermore, criminals plan their routes by capitalising on existing infrastructure such as availability of transport logistics, travel restrictions, law enforcement presence or weather conditions.

Migrant smuggling to and within the EU relies on a variety of means of transport. A large proportion of irregular migrants are smuggled to Europe by sea, often risking their lives in overcrowded boats. For those able to pay a much higher fee smugglers offer safer facilitation, smuggling in leisure vessels or by air. Over land, smugglers guide migrants on foot, or concealed in various types of vehicles such as cars, vans, (mini)buses, lorries and trailers, campers, taxis or trains.

Air smuggling to or within the EU entails higher smuggling fees, often to cover the

supply of fraudulent documents. Document fraud is a key feature of the serious and organised crime landscape in the EU as it enables a variety of crimes, including migrant smuggling. The document fraud business enables smuggling via legal travel routes, as well as the fraudulent legalisation of stay in the EU.

Migrant smugglers frequently cooperate with each other, both between countries and on various segments of the smuggling routes. Over time, many facilitators have built their own network and gained knowledge of the criminal business, enabling them to operate independently from the larger or more prominent criminal groups.

The leaders of the smuggling networks can orchestrate the criminal business remotely, capitalising on opportunities offered by the online environment and the digital solutions already omnipresent in the modus operandi of migrant smugglers. Free and popular digital solutions and platforms, such as social media and mobile applications, are frequently used for various purposes such as advertising,

recruitment, communication, coordination, guidance, money transfer or monitoring law enforcement activities.

While the overall profits remain difficult to estimate, many case examples indicate the lucrative nature of migrant smuggling. Some smugglers require advance payments, while others employ the pay-as-you-go business model or receive their fees upon successful arrival at the destination. Money laundering techniques used in migrant smuggling include formal or informal money transfer systems such as hawala banking, money mules and investments in legal business structures or properties.

Migrant smuggling within the EU, on secondary movements, remains one of the key threats for the EU. It is a diverse, dynamic and often multidirectional phenomenon, and has been sustained by ongoing demand from irregular migrants stranded in the EU. Routes departing from the first points of entry to the EU (Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, and recently, Lithuania and Poland) to destination countries such as France and Germany, continue to be used by smuggling networks active on secondary movements. Furthermore, many of these secondary movements continue on exit from the EU, where smugglers facilitate migrants onward to the UK. The Western Balkans remain critical for secondary movements, with criminal networks proactively offering their services to irregular migrants in the region - especially at locations where many of them gather, such as reception centres and regional transport hubs.



Europol has been an active participant in the Blueprint Network on Belarus, providing the EU Commission and different stakeholders with the most recent intelligence picture on migrant smuggling from Belarus, related secondary movements, and information on operational activities undertaken by Europol. Europol has also contributed to the Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint Network on Afghanistan, providing the EU Commission and different stakeholders with the most recent intelligence picture on Afghan migrant smuggling criminal networks operating in the EU, and on routes and modus operandi used by migrant smugglers to facilitate the irregular migration of Afghan nationals to the EU and between Member States.



FACILITATED SECONDARY MOVEMENTS EMERGED FROM THE BELARUSIAN ENTRY ROUTE

Developments in the EU's geographic proximity or in transit and source countries have influenced the migrant smuggling landscape in the EU. One example was the increased migratory pressure on the EU border with Belarus, amid geopolitical tensions and the instrumentalisation of migration. Additionally, recent developments in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban resurgence raise serious concerns regarding a potential increase in migratory movements of Afghan nationals to the EU. Until now this change has not materialised, with Afghan nationals still being reported as both smugglers and irregular migrants at the EU's entry points and on secondary movements. The dire economic and security situation in Afghanistan may push more irregular migrants to EU Member States, driving a more assertive involvement of criminal networks and facilitators. In 2021, reporting on migrant smuggling activities along most of the routes to and within the EU increased. Smuggling networks continued to predominantly use the three Mediterranean entry routes and the Western African route to smuggle irregular migrants into the EU. However, some changes were observed. Arrivals by sea to Cyprus tripled in 2021, replacing Greece as the prominent landing area on the Eastern Mediterranean route. Migratory pressure on the eastern borders route via Belarus has highlighted the flexibility and responsiveness of smugglers in the EU, who promptly focused their interest in the area and on secondary movements initiated there. The Western Balkan routes have remained key for smuggling activities along secondary movements through the EU.

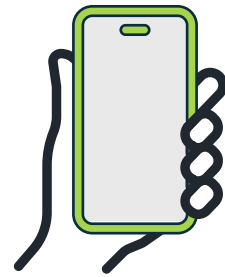
Since June 2021, smuggling activities from Belarus paralleled the increasing migratory pressure on the eastern borders route, affecting Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. Smuggling across the Belarusian border was followed by facilitated secondary movements; some of the routes continued out of the EU, with smugglers facilitating irregular migration to the UK. Iraqi nationals were among the top nationalities smuggled on this route. They were often smuggled while disguised as tourists, travelling by plane via Baghdad and Istanbul to Minsk, where smugglers accommodated them in hotels. From Minsk, migrants crossed the EU border on foot, on their own or with support from smugglers. Among other nationalities, smugglers also facilitated African nationals who are students at universities in Belarus, with both groups willing to move to EU Member States.

EUROPOL COORDINATES REFERRAL ACTION TARGETING MIGRANT SMUGGLING FROM BELARUS

Europol's operational response to the emerging crisis at the border with Belarus included rapid deployments of Guest Officers to Lithuania and EMSC staff to Lithuania and Poland. Furthermore, Europol reactivated the Joint Liaison Task Force Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings with the participation of the most affected countries (Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Finland), focusing on the situation at the border with Belarus.

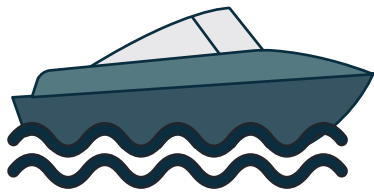
The EMSC, together with the EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) within Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), have set up and coordinated the referral activity for social media posts concerning the situation in the region. This activity involved law enforcement authorities from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Poland and Germany and targeted 455 social media accounts.

The referral activities focused on the collection of online content promoting migrant smuggling services from Belarus to Europe, and covered social media accounts advertising illicit facilitation and the sale of counterfeit ID documents, passports or visas. These accounts have been referred to the online service providers with the request to review them against the terms of service, and many were closed as a result of the referral process.²



SMUGGLING ON THE SEA CORRIDORS TO ITALY ALMOST DOUBLED IN 2021

Migrant smuggling to Italy almost doubled in 2021 compared to the previous year. Smugglers continued to organise departures from Libya and Tunisia in rubber, wooden or fiberglass boats. In parallel, smuggling of larger groups of various nationalities (Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani and Syrian) from Turkey to Italy in leisure and fishing vessels increased significantly. Smuggling fees for this route increased from an average of EUR 6 000 up to EUR 12 000 per person, making it one of the most expensive routes into the EU. Criminal networks frequently employed Ukrainian nationals to navigate the vessels from Turkey to Italy. The skippers were occasionally recruited online, via job advertisements posted on social media.



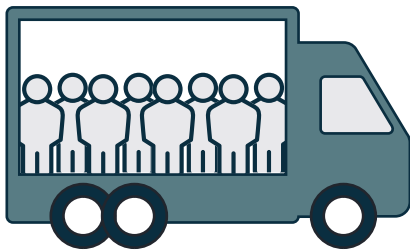
MULTI-COMMODITY SMUGGLING NETWORKS ON THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND WESTERN AFRICAN ROUTES

Criminal networks operating from Western African source countries run their smuggling operations based on links to departure areas primarily located in Morocco, the Western Sahara and Algeria. In 2021, these groups continued to provide facilitation services to the Spanish islands and the Spanish mainland. The modus operandi used by smugglers operating in the area involved, in its final step, the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea on speedboats or unseaworthy vessels. On the Western African route, the criminal networks smuggled migrants towards the Canary Islands in Cayucos, a fishing boat common in Western Africa for longer sailing trips.

SMUGGLING NETWORK CONNECTED TO FOUR DEATHS AT SEA DISMANTLED IN SPAIN

A criminal network composed of Spanish and Moroccan nationals smuggled Moroccan nationals through the Strait of Gibraltar on various vessels, some of them stolen, without undertaking any safety measures in case of emergency at sea. The boats were fuelled at sea to avoid suspicions from the authorities. The migrants, mainly young individuals and often minors, were paying about EUR 2 500 per person for the smuggling services. Evidence suggests links between the network and a deadly shipwreck, which took four lives in February 2021.³

A feature of the criminal networks active along the Western Mediterranean entry route is the multi-commodity dimension observed in their smuggling activities. Often, criminal networks involved in smuggling illicit commodities – drugs, tobacco, stolen goods – are also engaged in migrant smuggling, taking advantage of the logistical infrastructure already in place.



THE WESTERN BALKAN ROUTES REMAIN CRITICAL FOR SECONDARY MOVEMENTS

The use of vehicles to facilitate secondary movements by land through EU Member States remained the prominent modus operandi, often associated with dangerous concealment methods. The means of transportation varied from cars to vans, (mini)buses, lorries, trailers, campers or taxis. The Western Balkan region has remained the main gateway for most irregular migrants seeking secondary movements through the EU, with a vast smuggling infrastructure ready to provide facilitation services to match the demand.

24 ARRESTED FOR SMUGGLING MIGRANTS, DRUGS AND STOLEN GOODS ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

A criminal network smuggled migrants from Algeria to Spain and further to other EU Member States, while also facilitating fugitives' movements from Europe to the Middle East. The network was also involved in trafficking synthetic drugs and tobacco smuggling. On the side, the network was also active in property crime and document fraud. The group operated on a clear division of tasks; some members solely engaged in organisational tasks, while others dealt with the accommodation and transportation of the migrants. Hawaladars connected to the network sponsored the trafficking of migrants, charging high interest rates. Migrants were charged EUR 5 000 for the crossing from Algeria to Almería, Spain, and between EUR 700 and 1 000 for the journey from Spain to France. The suspects used forerunner cars to cross the border with France.⁴

SMUGGLING IN FAST LUXURY VEHICLES

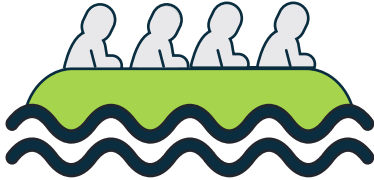
A network, composed of at least 43 members, smuggled migrants from Turkey to Greece through the Evros border region and further to Hungary. Smugglers transported up to 15 migrants at the time, concealed in the trunks of luxury vehicles, for a smuggling fee that varied between EUR 2 000 and 2 500 per person. The vehicles were often driven at up to 250 kilometres per hour to avoid police detection. As a result, both migrants and smugglers were injured in several speeding incidents and, in one case, a smuggler was killed.⁵

SMUGGLING IN CONCEALMENTS ALONG THE WESTERN BALKAN ROUTES TO GERMANY

A criminal network composed of Egyptian, Iraqi, Syrian and Romanian nationals, smuggled irregular migrants from Iran, Iraq, Jordan and Syria from Bulgaria and Serbia, via Romania and Hungary, further towards Germany. The network recruited, accommodated and transported the migrants in dangerous conditions, hidden in overcrowded lorries carrying various commodities, or in van concealments without proper ventilation. The smuggling fee ranged between EUR 4 000 and 10 000 depending on the smuggling package provided. In addition to smuggling, the criminal network was also involved in drugs trafficking, document fraud and property crime.⁶

SMUGGLING IN CONCEALMENTS ALONG THE WESTERN BALKAN ROUTES TO ITALY AND SPAIN

Law enforcement authorities from Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Romania and Slovenia, supported by Europol and Eurojust, dismantled a criminal network consisting of mainly Pakistani, but also Colombian, Spanish and Romanian nationals. The network recruited the migrants near refugee camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and smuggled them in life-threatening conditions concealed in vans and trucks along the Western Balkan routes to Italy, or in some cases Spain. The network charged EUR 3 000 for smuggling from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Slovenia, and between EUR 5 000 and 8 000 when the destination was Italy or Spain. At least 400 migrants were smuggled by the network, generating an illegal turnover of around EUR 2 million. The two action days led to 15 arrests, including that of the leader of the network, who was considered a high-value target by Europol.⁷



MIGRANT SMUGGLING BY SMALL BOATS - THE PREDOMINANT MODUS OPERANDI FOR UNLAWFULLY CROSSING THE ENGLISH CHANNEL TO THE UK

While in past years lorries have been the main means of transportation used by smugglers to facilitate irregular migrants from the EU to the UK, small boats became the predominant modus operandi for crossing the English Channel in 2021. **Almost 50 000 irregular migrants attempted to cross the English Channel in small boats** and almost half succeeded, most of them facilitated by criminal networks and smugglers.

The increased demand for facilitation services resulted in an increase in the number of facilitators involved, and in the professionalisation of the smugglers. A criminal logistics supply infrastructure has expanded along with smuggling activities. Nautical equipment is acquired by theft, auctions, online purchases, and from specialised stores in the region. Some

criminal networks have gone so far as to establish specialised procurement cells, or have outsourced their logistics needs to criminal facilitators across EU Member States who specialise in the services needed.

In order to tackle this phenomenon, a Joint Action was launched in the framework of the EMPACT Operational Action Plan 2021, under the priority migrant smuggling. The action, led by France and co-led by Europol, alongside Belgium and Eurojust, will continue in 2022 and is aimed at tackling migrant smuggling in small boats across the English Channel in a systematic and effective way.

Europol has deployed EMSC staff to the Joint Intelligence Cell set up between France and the UK, and has been supporting the Belgian 'Team Transit' to tackle the phenomenon. Europol's EMSC has set up the project 'La Manche' to comprehensively collect data on the phenomenon and coordinate associated operational activities. Europol has continued to monitor the developments in the region and has informed its partners and stakeholders through regular strategic analysis reports on the topic.

04. Trafficking in human beings (THB)

THB remains among the main threats posed by serious and organised crime for the EU.⁸ Sexual and labour exploitation are the most reported crimes, however trafficking networks target victims also for other purposes, including forced begging and forced criminality, benefit fraud, and illegal adoption schemes.

In the EU, human traffickers and their victims are both of EU and non-EU origins. Traffickers target both female and male, adult and underage victims. Continued demand for sexual services and the opportunity to exploit cheap labour are ample incentives for the trafficking networks. In addition to the victims' exploitation, criminal networks engage in a wide range of related offences, including document fraud, economic and benefit fraud, employment law infringements, money laundering and corruption. THB networks targeting non-EU victims are also often involved in migrant smuggling, or at least in cooperation with smugglers.

The THB process has largely moved online, with recruitment, contacts, the advertising

of services, and much more taking place in the online realm. Nowadays most victims are identified and recruited via the internet, particularly on social media platforms. The digitalisation of the crime area has also driven an increased flexibility in rotating the victims from one location to another, and has allowed the leadership of the criminal networks to coordinate their operations remotely, thus reducing risks while maintaining profits.

The advantages of technology for traffickers also include increased anonymity. Criminals active in THB have adopted encrypted communications solutions, capitalising on legislative discrepancies in regulating and providing data. People's increasing online presence on social media, recruitment websites, dating apps and escort pages, allows criminals to reach out to a broader audience, in terms of potential victims and of clients. The digitalisation of the many stages of the trafficking process was exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic.⁹



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Sexual exploitation remains the most frequently reported form of THB in the EU. THB for sexual exploitation is a gender-specific phenomenon, as the vast majority of victims are women, both adult and underage. Nevertheless, criminal networks also exploit men as well as transgender victims. Within the criminal networks, the role of female suspects has expanded, enabled by the increased digitalisation of the THB process.⁹

Female suspects, who are often former victims of trafficking co-opted into the criminal organisation, can be tasked with recruitment, grooming of victims, physically controlling victims, arranging logistics, communication with clients, and collection of illicit profits. The higher tiers of the criminal networks are male, and tend to keep themselves distanced from the victims and operations. Increasingly, exploiters defraud their victims to voluntarily enter into a business agreement, according to which the prostitution profits are supposedly divided between them. In this way, victims do not perceive themselves as such and eventually end up being abused.

In the era of digital THB, traffickers largely target potential victims online. Male suspects still make use of the 'lover boy method' to lure victims. Exploitative sexual services are increasingly advertised on escort and dating websites but also on popular social media platforms.⁹ Even though legal business structures are still used as locations for abuse (i.e. hotels, restaurants, cafes, nightclubs, sex clubs and massage salons), exploitation increasingly occurs in privately owned or rented apartments, hindering law enforcement from detecting criminal activities.

Most of the communication between clients and victims, and the planning of logistics behind encounters is also handled online. Victims therefore do not remain in one place and can be easily moved between locations, cities and even countries. 'Sex tours', during which victims travel to different cities to meet clients in rental apartments and hotel rooms, are increasingly reported.

TWENTY-FIVE VICTIMS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IDENTIFIED IN SPAIN AND ROMANIA

On 9 March 2021, Europol supported Spain and Romania against a criminal network involved in sexual exploitation. During the action day, 16 house searches were conducted and 19 arrests were made, while 18 potential victims were safeguarded. The suspects belonged to a Romanian family-based criminal group recruiting co-national female victims, luring them to travel to Spain with the so-called 'lover boy method'. Upon arrival, they were forced into prostitution on the street. The victims endured harsh living conditions, cold and hunger. Some were forced to prostitute themselves while pregnant and at high risk of being infected by COVID-19. To prove their 'ownership' over the victims, the criminal gang tattooed them. The suspects collected the money from the sexual exploitation and invested it in high-end vehicles, real estate, luxury goods and drugs.

As a follow up, Europol supported Romania and Spain in July 2021, to dismantle another group, again with branches in Romania and Spain, that was luring victims into prostitution with the so-called 'lover boy' method. The victims were sexually exploited in nightclubs in Spain. To avoid detection, the criminal group did not use money transfer services. Instead, Romanian gang leaders smuggled the cash out of the country themselves. The suspects also did their best to avoid using regular mobile networks and traveling by plane. Europol coordinated the operational activities, facilitated the exchange of information and provided analytical support. Europol financed the deployment of two Spanish agents in Romania for operational meetings and participation in the action day. Two action days resulted in 13 arrests in Spain and Romania, and 25 potential victims identified.¹⁰



LABOUR EXPLOITATION

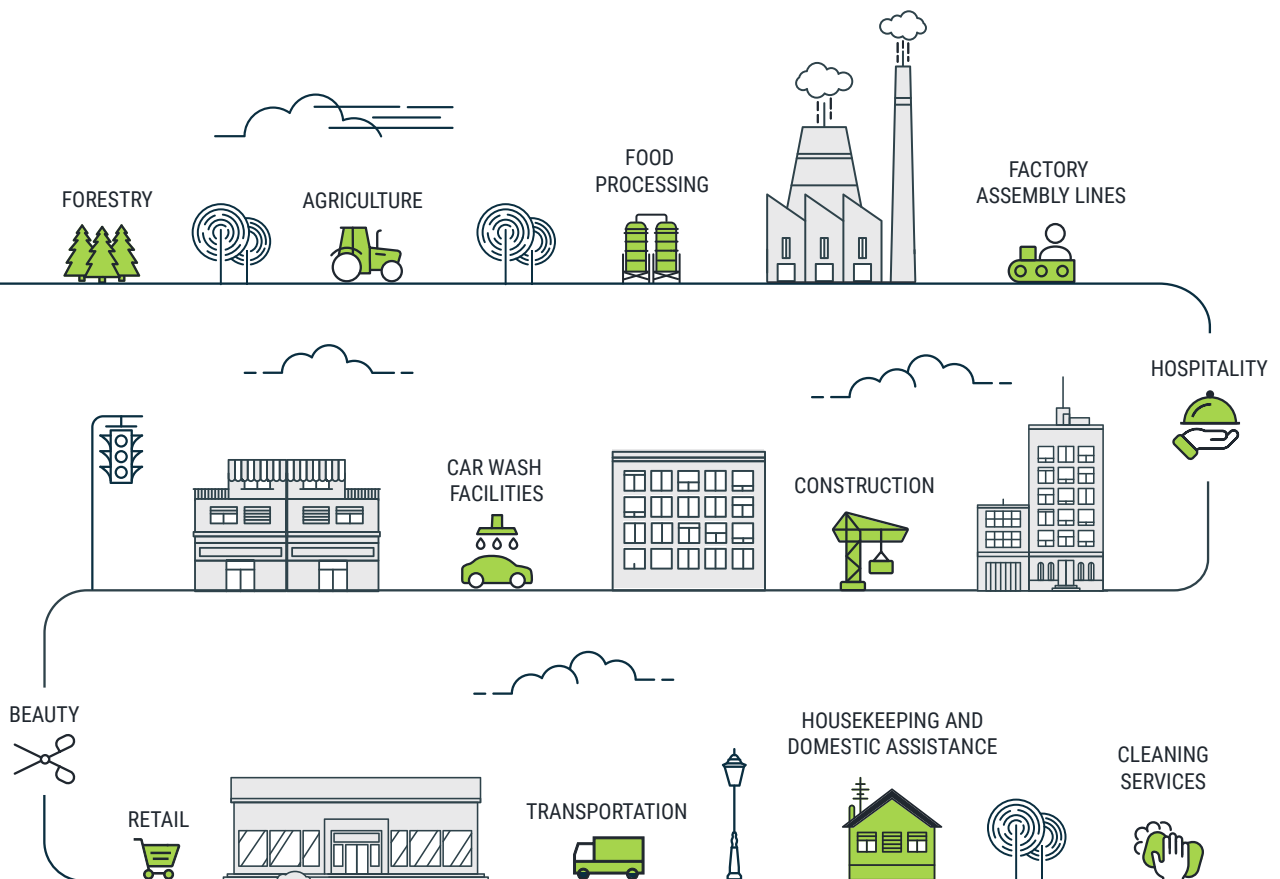
Labour exploitation is increasingly reported in the EU. Criminal networks involved in trafficking and labour exploitation operate in a variety of cash-intensive sectors where low-waged and seasonal workers abound.

NEARLY 90 VICTIMS OF THB FOR LABOUR EXPLOITATION IDENTIFIED IN ITALY

On 4 September 2021, nearly 90 victims of labour exploitation have been identified in Italy, following support provided by EMSC and Eurojust to the Italian and Moldovan authorities, as a result of a joint investigation team (JIT) initiated in 2019 against a criminal network involved in human trafficking for labour exploitation. The criminal group recruited Moldovan women and transported them to Italy using tourist visas and placed them to work as domestic assistants for local families. For their work, the victims did not receive wages nor any social benefits. Six house searches conducted in Italy during the action day lead to 6 arrests, the identification of 87 victims and the seizure of 27 passports of victims and other documentation revealing their victimisation since 2018. Digital equipment, mobile phones and cash were also seized.¹¹

Main Industries

Targeted by criminal networks involved in labour exploitation



Victims of labour exploitation are more exposed to physical violence compared to other forms of THB, with violence being exerted to force compliance with inhumane working conditions. Many victims are forced to live in the same place where they are abused. Exploiters often threaten non-EU victims with prompting their return, if they try to contact the police.

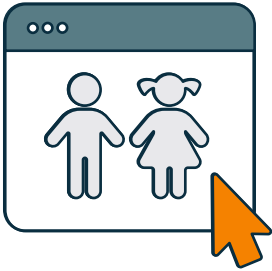
Criminal networks involved in labour exploitation of non-EU victims are often linked to migrant smuggling activities, either cooperating with smugglers or engaging in both crimes. Victims of labour exploitation are increasingly targeted online by recruiters. Criminal networks lure them with promises of well-paid jobs abroad and good working conditions. They set up or cooperate with recruitment agencies and subcontractors, providing a façade of legality to their criminal scheme. When labour exploitation is present, traffickers often provide false employment contracts to victims. Exploiters usually force their victims to open bank accounts, over which they take control in order to access victims' wages and finances.

630 POTENTIAL VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IDENTIFIED DURING EUROPE-WIDE COORDINATED ACTION DAYS

Between 31 May and 6 June 2021, EMSC supported a Europe-wide coordinated Action Week against THB for labour exploitation.

The operation, led by authorities in the Netherlands, involved police, immigration and border guards, labour inspectorates and tax authorities from 24 countries. Inspections were carried out in labour-intensive businesses such as transport, logistics and construction. The Action Week resulted in 229 arrests (73 for THB); 630 possible victims of different types of exploitation being identified, and around 750 new investigations being initiated, of which 150 related to THB.

Between 9 and 16 September 2021, Europol supported Europe-wide coordinated Action Days against THB for labour exploitation in the agricultural sector. The operation, led by France, involved 2 050 officers from police, immigration and border guards, labour inspectorates and tax authorities from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands and Spain. The European Labour Authority (ELA) also supported the action days. The joint action resulted in 12 arrests, identification of 54 suspected traffickers and 269 potential victims.¹²



CHILD TRAFFICKING

Criminal networks involved in THB target underage male and female victims, nationals of both EU and non-EU countries. Underage female victims are usually exploited along with adult victims in prostitution and through forced marriages. Non-EU female minors, especially those who are in irregular stay, are at greater risk of being targeted by traffickers and often end up abused in more clandestine locations and circumstances.

European family clans often traffic and abuse their children and the children in their communities, mainly for begging, pickpocketing, shop lifting, and as domestic servants. Increasingly, criminal networks active in the EU make use of vulnerable children, often of non-EU origins, to perpetrate crimes. Children are also trafficked and sold through illegal adoption schemes.

With much of the social life moving online during COVID-19 pandemic, minors have become an even more vulnerable target group for criminal recruiters, due to their poor digital hygiene. Online grooming is particularly concerning, as traffickers make use of a wealth of personal information that children make accessible on the internet, allowing offenders to socially engineer their tactics.⁹

JOINT ACTIONS LEAD TO 92 MINOR VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION IDENTIFIED ACROSS EUROPE

An operation targeting criminal networks involved in THB led to the identification of 187 potential victims, including 92 minors. The action days, taking place between 28 June and 4 July 2021, focused on unaccompanied minors, minors trafficked within the EU for begging, forced criminality and sexual exploitation, and on document fraud. The actions involved 18 countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) and were supported by ESMC and Frontex. In total, 12 511 officers across Europe checked 186 400 people, 12 200 locations, 22 500 vehicles, 72 850 documents. 175 arrests and 78 additional identifications of suspects were realised. As a follow up, 181 new investigations were initiated.¹³

05. Links between crimes: a networked and profit-driven environment

The criminal environment observed in the EU is diverse, flexible, networked and always profit-driven. Logistics or service providers are jointly used by several networks or are employed by the suspects to perpetrate different crimes under their portfolio. In addition to irregular migrants, some criminal networks combine migrant smuggling with trafficking of illicit commodities – most often drugs, tobacco products or stolen goods. Furthermore, trafficking in human beings is occasionally intertwined with migrant smuggling into and through the EU, and document fraud frequently emerges as the bridge between crime areas, as a key enabler of criminal operations.

Upon arrival in the EU, irregular migrants are often victimised in exploitative working conditions. They are obliged to hand over most of their wages to their smugglers, as a means to repay their debt for the migrant smuggling services. Sometimes, criminal networks target irregular migrants already residing in the EU, who are victimised in exchange of fraudulent documents and residence permits.⁷



Migrant smuggling and THB are sometimes seen as interrelated criminal offences. However, they are legally distinct offences. Migrant smuggling is a criminal activity in violation of national and international laws on entry, transit or residence of irregular migrants. The trafficking in human beings is a crime against a person and violates fundamental human rights.

VIETNAMESE NATIONALS SMUGGLED AND EXPLOITED IN THE EU: OPERATIONAL TASK FORCE ETAGENWOHNUNG

In May 2021, over 700 police officers carried out coordinated raids across Germany and Slovakia against the members of a criminal syndicate smuggling Vietnamese nationals into Europe. The investigation uncovered that this criminal network was responsible for facilitating into Germany the entry of over 250 Vietnamese irregular migrants, charging each between EUR 13 000 to EUR 21 000 for the journey. In Vietnam, the suspects provided migrants with valid Schengen visas issued on false grounds, using invitations from various companies controlled by the network in Slovakia. Once the migrants arrived in Europe, the network would arrange for their travel to Germany by means of private cars. There, the migrants were deprived of their personal belongings and were kept in captivity against their will until they paid back their debts to the criminal network through unpaid work. This sting was carried out in the framework of an Operational Taskforce set up at Europol in November 2020 between the German and Slovak Police, and EMSC.¹⁴

DISMANTLEMENT OF A CRIMINAL NETWORK INVOLVED IN MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR LABOUR EXPLOITATION

An investigation carried out between French, Romanian and Moldovan authorities, supported by Europol and Eurojust, led to the dismantlement of an organised crime group involved in migrant smuggling, human trafficking for labour exploitation, document fraud, social benefit fraud and money laundering. The criminal network smuggled and registered Moldovan workers in France with fake documents while keeping their real passports as a guarantee. Illicit profits were estimated around EUR 14 million. During the operations, simultaneous raids were carried out in France, Romania and Moldova and 51 locations were searched in the three countries. Authorities froze 11 bank accounts, arrested 38 suspects and seized, among others, 19 vehicles including 15 high-end cars, 2 jet skis, weapons, phones, and roughly EUR 100 000 in cash. The EMSC facilitated the exchange of information and provided analytical support. On the action day, the EMSC deployed a virtual command post to enable the real-time exchange of information between investigators, Europol and Eurojust. EMSC analysts also cross-checked operational information against Europol's databases to provide leads to investigators in the field.¹⁵

06. The way forward

The last year saw a significant rise in illegal border crossings into the EU, as well as a rise in secondary movements of irregular migrants between countries in the EU. This increase in demand, and the resultant rise in profits, has led to further professionalisation of the smuggling networks behind irregular migration and THB. With this comes an increased risk of violence, as groups vie for control of smuggling routes and increasingly use aggression against law enforcement.

This changing landscape means that THB and migrant smuggling will remain two key priorities for EU Member States. Meanwhile, the findings showcased in this annual report inform our approach to investigations, how we collaborate with other organisations, and the support we provide.

The modern nature of migrant smuggling and THB requires the EMSC's support for Member States' investigations to follow a 'whole-of-the-route approach', accounting for each step of the processes behind these crime areas. This means looking at not only EU countries but also third countries,

so we can effectively tackle international criminal networks. As part of this, the support the EMSC provides to investigations will follow EMPACT priorities on migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, and pursue high-value targets within smuggling networks through the promotion of dedicated Operational Task Forces (OTF). Another key pillar of our work for the year ahead will be increasing the EMSC's footprint in the digitalisation of migrant smuggling and THB, tackling criminals using new technologies to perpetrate their crimes.

Europol's wide range of partnerships in the fight against organised crime reflects this new reality in migrant smuggling and THB. The EMSC will continue its successful collaboration with Member States via the Joint Liaison Task Force on Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings. In the framework of the Information Clearing House (ICH), we are teaming up with Frontex, INTERPOL, and where relevant EUNAVFORMED Operation Irini. Furthermore, the Joint Operational Team Mare will continue to lend its support

to investigations targeting criminal networks related to sea smuggling and sea-facilitated secondary movements. Meanwhile, we will expand our digital investigations with the support of Europol's EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU). We will also explore further cooperation opportunities with the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) in the framework of the EMPACT Cycle.

For these partners and investigations, Europol will support national law enforcement agencies through its Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) and by providing on-the-spot support for action days. We also recognise that longer-term, more permanent deployments to Member States, especially those at the EU's external border, will improve the EMSC's position in fighting migrant smugglers and people traffickers. Taken together, this is how the EMSC and its experts can bolster Europe's security and help Member States effectively combat organised crime.

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