

EUROPOL SPOTLIGHT

**CRIMINAL
NETWORKS
IN MIGRANT
SMUGGLING**



Migrant smuggling is a dynamic criminal activity that affects the EU's internal security. The market for migrant smuggling services to and within the EU is reaching new heights, fuelled by emerging and deepening crises, most notably economic recessions, environmental emergencies caused by climate change, as well as conflicts and demographic pressure in many origin countries. The perception of the EU as a comparatively more stable region, coupled with steady labour demands in EU destination countries, additionally sustains the market for smuggling services.

Migrant smuggling networks have proven to be agile, adapting quickly to changes in irregular migration's dynamics and evolving law enforcement activities.

Criminal networks diversify routes, prices and modes of transport based on the demand for facilitation services, logistical needs and the emergence of new migratory hubs. Intensified law enforcement controls also prompt criminal networks to shift to alternative routes and modi operandi.

The migrant smuggling business model is characterised by cooperation, which may be ad hoc or permanent.

Criminal networks often cooperate with each other on various legs of the smuggling routes. Some large and multi-location criminal networks are able to provide facilitation services across the entire journey. Some collaborations between networks are based on a crime-as-a-service business model, with criminals offering document fraud or the provision of nautical equipment, for example.

The criminal process of migrant smuggling comprises recruitment and transportation of irregular migrants as core activities.

Criminal networks may offer additional services to their clients, including accommodation at various stages during the journey, or the provision of fraudulent documents.

Criminal networks can be complex and consist of various roles, including leaders, middlemen and low-level facilitators. The leaders of smuggling networks are able to run smuggling activities remotely and display high managerial skills, whereas middlemen can be involved in several actions, such as recruiting irregular migrants and overseeing logistical and financial arrangements. Low-level facilitators are mainly involved in the transportation of irregular migrants and can on occasion work on a crime-as-a-service basis.

Criminal networks rely on several tools to facilitate migrant smuggling. Digital solutions are used at every stage to advertise routes and prices, communicate with irregular migrants and produce fraudulent documents. Corruption and legal business structures are employed to carry out smuggling activities. Violence, threats thereof and reckless behaviour on the part of migrant smugglers are directed against law enforcement authorities, competing criminal actors and irregular migrants, often resulting in fatal incidents.

What is crime-as-a-service?

Organised crime in the European Union is a varied landscape of criminal actors and criminal activities with one central focus: the generation of profit. With this objective in mind, criminal networks are flexible in their cooperation, composition, *modi operandi*, and also in the criminal activities they pursue. Some networks have found a niche in providing an expert criminal service to other actors in the world of organised crime – the act of providing crime-as-a-service.

The global, collaborative and agile nature of criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling

Most migrant smuggling networks active in the EU are composed of both EU and non-EU nationals, with the majority of individuals being non-EU adult males. In many instances, smugglers have the same nationality as the irregular migrants they smuggle, or originate from the countries along the smuggling routes. Many non-EU nationals involved in migrant smuggling legally reside in the EU. Migrant smugglers originating from the EU typically operate in their own countries or in neighbouring ones.

Smuggling networks vary in size and are based on a business model that sees criminals cooperate on an ad hoc or, when needed, a more permanent basis. Smaller networks work at local or regional level, often relying on the activities of loosely connected individuals. In many cases, these individual criminals provide their services to multiple smuggling networks. Larger criminal networks typically operate at international level and are involved in complex smuggling operations. These criminal networks usually have the expertise to cover facilitation services along the whole journey.

A key characteristic of criminal networks is their agility and adaptability in response to changing dynamics in irregular migration, law enforcement responses and developments in the wider external environment. Notably, criminal networks diversify smuggling routes and prices based on demand. Smuggling fees and services fluctuate according to factors such as the safety of the smuggling methods, the difficulty of border crossing, the length of the journey, the country of destination and the wealth of irregular migrants, among others. While the largest proportion of irregular migrants are smuggled to the EU on overcrowded boats and vehicles, criminal networks offer safer means of transportation, including by air, for those able to pay higher fees.

Migrant smuggling criminal networks are able to rapidly (re)locate smuggling activities close to new migratory hubs, while criminal networks active in other crime areas are able to swiftly set up migrant smuggling services with the incentive of high profits. Smuggling routes are rearranged following heightened law enforcement activities and changes in visa and asylum policies.

The criminal process of migrant smuggling

Migrant smuggling comprises several activities that can be logically organised into a process. The initial activity entails the recruitment of irregular migrants. This often happens in key hubs of migrant smuggling, where large concentrations of irregular migrants are present in reception centres and makeshift camps. Advertisements of routes and prices on social media platforms is a widely used recruiting method. Criminal networks

known to have a higher degree of success in their smuggling activities are able to attract irregular migrants and, in turn, to demand higher fees. Indeed, irregular migrants usually contact smugglers based on recommendations and positive reviews made by previous clients. Other factors that increase the attractiveness of criminal networks are the linguistic and ethnic ties shared between smugglers and irregular migrants.

Once the recruitment is finalised, the core activity of migrant smuggling – the transportation of the irregular migrants – takes place. This could pertain to transportation into the EU, within the EU (known as secondary movements), or from/via the EU to a third region – or a combination. Transportation to enter the EU is often offered in combination with secondary movements. The facilitation of secondary movements across the EU is a very profitable business, responding to high demand from both irregular migrants arriving in the EU and those who have been present in Member States for a longer time. Smuggling services to non-EU destinations, such as the United Kingdom or North America, are also offered in the migrant smuggling market. Given the length of routes, criminal networks combine several means of transport on sea, land and air routes.

During the phase of transportation, criminal networks may offer additional services to irregular migrants, such as accommodation in stash houses and hotels, delivery of fraudulent documents and support for the legalisation of stay. The latter is carried out through several means, including organising marriages of convenience and instructing irregular migrants to apply for international protection in case of detection by law enforcement authorities. Fraudulent asylum claims enable irregular migrants to temporarily legalise their residence status in the EU while onward facilitation is organised.

Payment of the smuggling fees is usually arranged upon the successful arrival of the irregular migrants in the destination countries. However, some migrant smugglers employ the pay-as-you-go approach. Fees are mostly paid in cash via trusted hawaladars*. The use of money transfer applications has been noticed on a limited scale. Low-level facilitators and drivers working on a crime-as-a-service basis are paid after giving a proof that the irregular migrants have arrived at the final destination.

*Hawala (operated by so-called hawaladars) is an informal value transfer system that permits payments to remote beneficiaries without any physical transferral of cash. To begin a transfer, the remitter gives an amount to hawaladar A. After charging a fee, hawaladar A contacts his counterpart, hawaladar B, and informs him that he has been entrusted an amount that can be immediately paid to a beneficiary at B's location. Transactions can be done both ways. Once in a while, A and B will balance their accounts; this is the only transaction that may result in a physical transfer of cash between the two hawaladars. The system wholly relies on trust among operators.

In most countries, hawala is not considered an illegal activity – this is because it also supports people who cannot benefit from financial inclusion (the typical situation being a worker in one country sending back a part of their income to their origin country). However since it is unregulated and transactions are difficult to trace, it is highly vulnerable to money laundering activities.

How smuggling networks are organised: roles and collaboration

Smuggling networks can be extensive and complex, with members holding different roles in the groups. The leaders of smuggling networks are able to run the smuggling activities remotely, meaning the associates involved in the transportation of irregular migrants are the ones exposed to law enforcement detection. Digital tools employed to organise and run migrant smuggling activities add an additional layer of protection for the criminal networks' leaders, who reside both inside and outside the EU.

Middlemen have a variety of functions, including recruiting irregular migrants, maintaining contacts with low-level associates, and overseeing logistical arrangements such as providing accommodation along the routes and handling payments.

Low-level facilitators are mainly involved in the transportation of irregular migrants. Depending on the route used, they can act as guides while crossing the borders with the irregular migrants, as drivers of vehicles on land routes, and as skippers of vessels on sea routes. Occasionally, criminal networks instruct irregular migrants to steer boats themselves in exchange for reduced smuggling fees.

Each criminal actor involved in facilitating irregular migrants into the EU, secondary movements and the legalisation of a residence status holds different forms of expertise. Low-level criminals are typically required to know the geographical area along the route and how to use encrypted communications, and can be responsible for monitoring law enforcement activities. The leaders, middlemen and those overseeing the start-to-end journey need managerial and coordination skills.

Some criminal networks operating in migrant smuggling have a wide geographical reach, spanning origin, transit and destination countries. These criminal networks operate an end-to-end business model, providing facilitation services across the entire journey. In many cases, the members of these large criminal networks only know associates operating in specific segments of the routes. Yet criminal networks operate in an intertwined environment, often collaborating with other criminal groups and individual smugglers on specific legs of the journey in order to divide the responsibilities related to the logistical organisation and the transportation of irregular migrants.

Similarly, migrant smuggling networks may use both licit and illicit dedicated service providers such as those specialising in the provision of nautical equipment or fraudulent documents.

Document fraud remains instrumental in enabling migrant smuggling. Fraudulent documents are used on all smuggling routes for entry into and secondary movements within the EU, and are required especially on air routes. They are also used to legalise the stay of irregular migrants in the EU.

Criminal networks active in document fraud mostly operate from the main hubs for irregular migration, where fraudulent documents are produced in print shops and often traded online.

The tools enabling migrant smuggling

The opportunities offered by widely available digital services and tools online are thoroughly exploited by migrant smuggling networks at all stages of the process. Online advertisement of smuggling services, routes and prices has become increasingly professional, with criminals using several platforms in parallel, updating information regularly, and sharing videos and reviews of successful operations. As an advertising strategy to convince irregular migrants of the chances of success, smuggling networks also post videos on social media showing weapons and threatening to attack law enforcement authorities should they intervene during a smuggling event. Smugglers share travel guidance on social media and provide instructions to irregular migrants on how to cross green borders via encrypted communication apps or digital maps. Digital solutions are also employed to forge or copy documents and create high-quality counterfeits.

Criminal networks demonstrate a high degree of violence and recklessness in their smuggling activities. Migrant smugglers frequently employ violence or threat thereof against irregular migrants, to ensure their compliance or force them to pay smuggling fees. In addition to direct and intentional violence, irregular migrants are often endangered by the *modi operandi* used by criminals to facilitate them across borders. Irregular migrants are exposed to risks on all routes. Endangerment includes the widespread use of unsafe means of transportation and concealment, as well as reckless behaviour on the part of the smugglers when attempting to escape law enforcement authorities, with incidents resulting in the death and injuries of irregular migrants. Law enforcement personnel have also fallen victim to this reckless behaviour or violence from migrant smugglers attempting to avoid apprehension. Likewise, violence from criminal networks targets competitors, aiming at obtaining or maintaining control over the migrant smuggling market.

In some cases, criminal networks exploit the services of transportation and rental companies to facilitate movements of irregular migrants. In a similar way, smugglers may make use of hospitality sector facilities to accommodate irregular migrants temporarily. Money service businesses are used to launder the proceeds of migrant smuggling.

Criminal networks may resort to corruption in order to carry out their smuggling activities. Smugglers at border crossings target law enforcement officials with bribery attempts as part of their *modi operandi*. Criminal networks may also use corruption to facilitate the acquisition of fraudulent documents.

Despite being legally distinct criminal offences, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings are sometimes interrelated crimes. In cases of expensive smuggling fees, irregular migrants pay the debt accumulated with the criminal networks through exploitative working conditions. This method is more commonly used by highly organised criminal networks, as they have the connections or capabilities to profit from the irregular migrants' debt bondage in transit or destination countries. Criminal actors sometimes target irregular migrants already present in the EU, offering them under-waged jobs as payment for fraudulent documents and their support in obtaining residence permits.

Some well-established criminal networks are able to manage both migrant smuggling and labour and sexual exploitation, while in other cases trafficking networks outsource the movements of victims into and within the EU to migrant smugglers. Document fraud is a common enabler of these crimes.

Europol's response and way forward

Migrant smuggling remains a key priority for EU Member States. Sustained smuggling activities on all main entry routes into and secondary movements within the EU, shifts in smuggling routes and *modi operandi*, and an increased risk of violence all require law enforcement agencies to be vigilant and prepared.

Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) supports national law enforcement authorities of EU Member States and Europol's partner countries in their fight against migrant smuggling by providing dedicated operational analytical support. The EMSC has specific instruments to support Member States' investigations focusing on each step of the migrant smuggling process.

The Joint Liaison Task Force Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings brings together Member States and Europol partners to strengthen cooperation amongst all authorities involved. EMPACT operations and dedicated Operational Task Forces (OTFs) streamline the efforts of Member States and operational partners in identifying and investigating High Value Targets.

The Joint Operational Team Mare supports investigations on criminal networks facilitating migrant smuggling by sea, while the EMSC collaborates with Frontex, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), INTERPOL and European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFORMED) Operation IRINI within the framework of the International Clearing House.

European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC)

Established in 2016 in the aftermath of the migration crisis in Europe, the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) covers two Analytical Projects (APs). These are dedicated to tackling migrant smuggling (AP Migrant Smuggling) and trafficking in human beings (AP Phoenix). Both APs play a crucial role in coordinating and supporting law enforcement partners in EU Member States in conducting high-profile operations against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. The EMSC closely cooperates with partner EU Agencies dealing with judicial cooperation (Eurojust), border management (Frontex) and international protection (EUAA).

EMSC in 2022 - Activities and performance indicators

Migrant smuggling

AP MIGRANT SMUGGLING	2022
Number of accepted contributions ¹	13 988
Operational reports	966
Number of Operations	131
Active Operational Task Forces ²	6
On-the-spot Action Days	31
Active High Value Targets ³	49

Trafficking in human beings

AP PHOENIX	2022
Number of accepted contributions	3 104
Operational reports	247
Number of Operations	64
Active Operational Task Forces	2
On-the-spot Action Days	22
Active High Value Targets	6

1 Messages/cases contributed to Europol via SIENA. 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 An Operational Task Force is defined as a temporary group of people consisting of representatives of the Member States and Europol

3 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.



Headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands, Europol supports the 27 EU Member States in their fight against terrorism, cybercrime and other serious and organised forms of crime. We also work with many non-EU partner states and international organisations. From its various threat assessments to its intelligence-gathering and operational activities, Europol has the tools and resources it needs to do its part in making Europe safer.

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