

2025 **EUROPEAN MIGRANT SMUGGLING CENTRE: YEARLY ACTIVITY OVERVIEW**

9TH ANNUAL REPORT





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EUROPEAN MIGRANT SMUGGLING CENTRE: ANNUAL ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

ABOUT EMSC:

The European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) was established in early 2016 by Europol, to support EU Member States in dismantling complex and sophisticated networks involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings by:



Delivering expertise and resources



Ensuring the swift and safe exchange of information



Providing operational support to cross-border investigations

" Migrant smugglers and human traffickers evolve constantly, and so must we. To succeed in our fight against these criminals, we must target the entire chain from recruitment, through transit, to exploitation and the financial flows behind it. Europol stands ready as a true partner: supporting investigations, facilitating intelligence sharing, and coordinating joint operations."

Catherine De Bolle, Executive Director, Europol

MIGRANT SMUGGLING:

Irregular migration is a complex phenomenon driven by a variety of factors. Whether it is armed conflict and persecution, economic or environmental causes that drive migrants to leave their homes in search of a better life, criminal networks are systematically profiting from their vulnerability to generate profits. These criminals offer a wide variety of services ranging from transport, guidance, accommodation in transit locations or fraudulent documents to enable the illegal travel, entry and stay.

In 2024, Europol detected the following trends in this crime area:

The globalisation of criminal networks:

Criminal networks are decentralised; however, they are also structured, scalable and increasingly global. Each part of the criminal chain along smuggling routes is managed by different actors (local smugglers and criminals) while leadership and key operatives are often based outside the EU, allowing the networks to remain operational even when one part is taken down.

The globalisation of these networks, means that criminals can tailor their business models and easily respond to external factors, such as emerging crises and instabilities, policy developments, environmental conditions, lawenforcement activities, and demand for facilitation services. These networks are spread across countries and continents, and operate in disregard of geographical confines.

The exploitation of the digital domain:

Criminal networks continue to exploit new technologies in all aspects of their criminal activities, including recruitment of low-level facilitators, the creation of AI-generated advertisements in various languages, forging documents,

and communications. For the latter, criminals use encrypted messaging platforms as they perceive them to be a “safe environment”, while they use social media platforms as the main gateway for advertising facilitation and first contact.

Additionally, Europol has observed a growing use of cryptocurrencies to transfer smuggling fees and to pay low-level facilitators. Some hawala systems now integrate cryptocurrencies, while other networks rely on crypto brokers, courier services for cash, or the conversion of crypto into cash.

The use of violence as a business feature:

Criminal networks are increasingly using violence as a tool. Threats, kidnappings, beatings, sexual abuse, and torture are examples of methods used to extort migrants and their families for ransom.

Furthermore, in order to defend their market, criminal networks do not refrain from violent acts against other rival networks and, more noticeably law enforcement.

COMBATING MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN 2024:

266

cross-border operations supported.

8

operational taskforces supported, composed of a group of experts and resources formed to execute planned missions.

48

action days organised with law enforcement and judicial authorities to tackle high-risk criminal networks.

over
14K

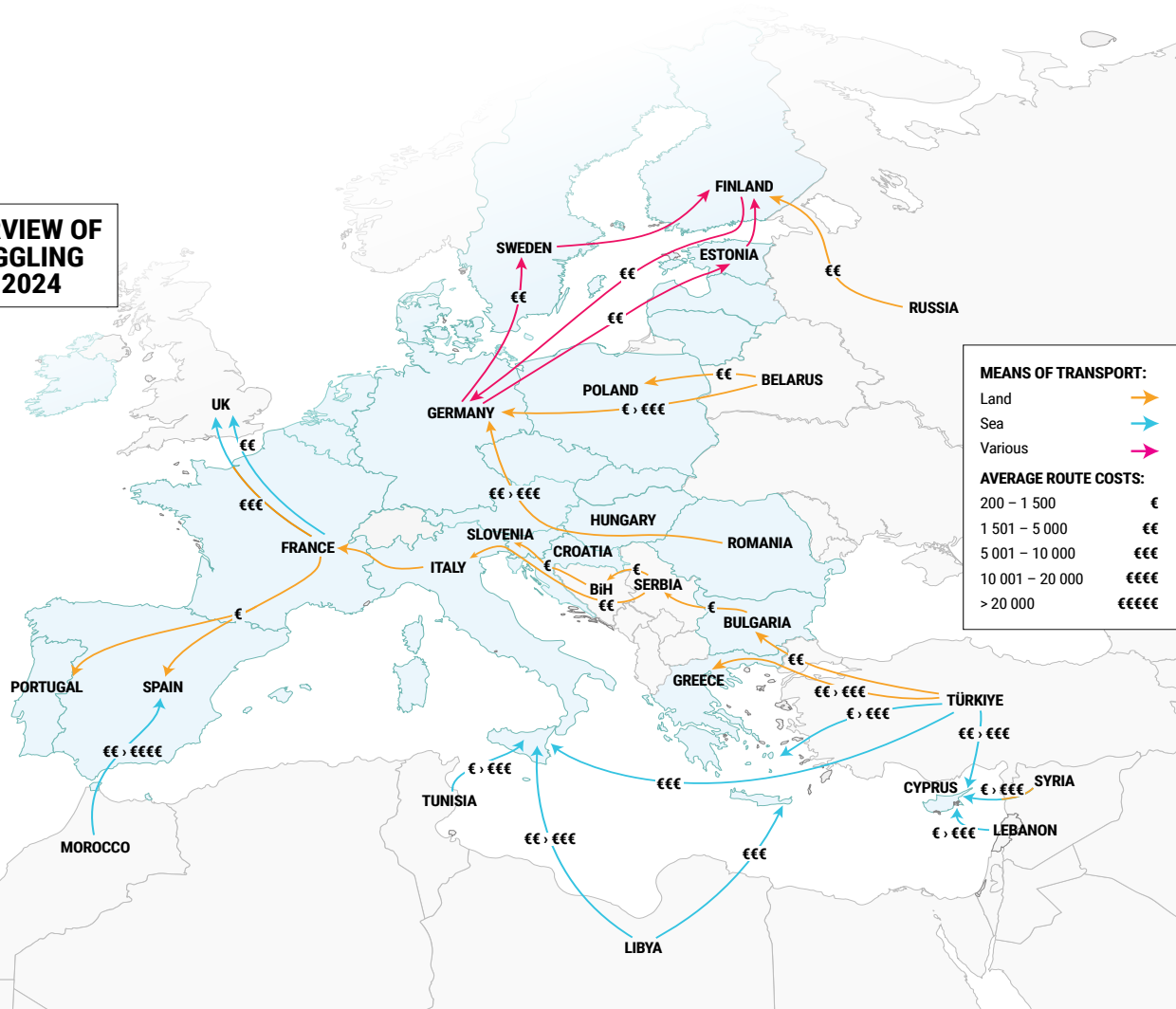
SIENA messages received by Europol and accepted for further processing.

791

analytical and intelligence operational reports.

MIGRANT SMUGGLING: PERSISTING AND FLUCTUATING FLOWS

OVERVIEW OF SMUGGLING FEES 2024



COSTS FOR FRAUDULENT DOCUMENTS AND RELATED SERVICES:

Forged ID Card € 500 to 3 000

Look-alike passport € 1 000 to 3 000

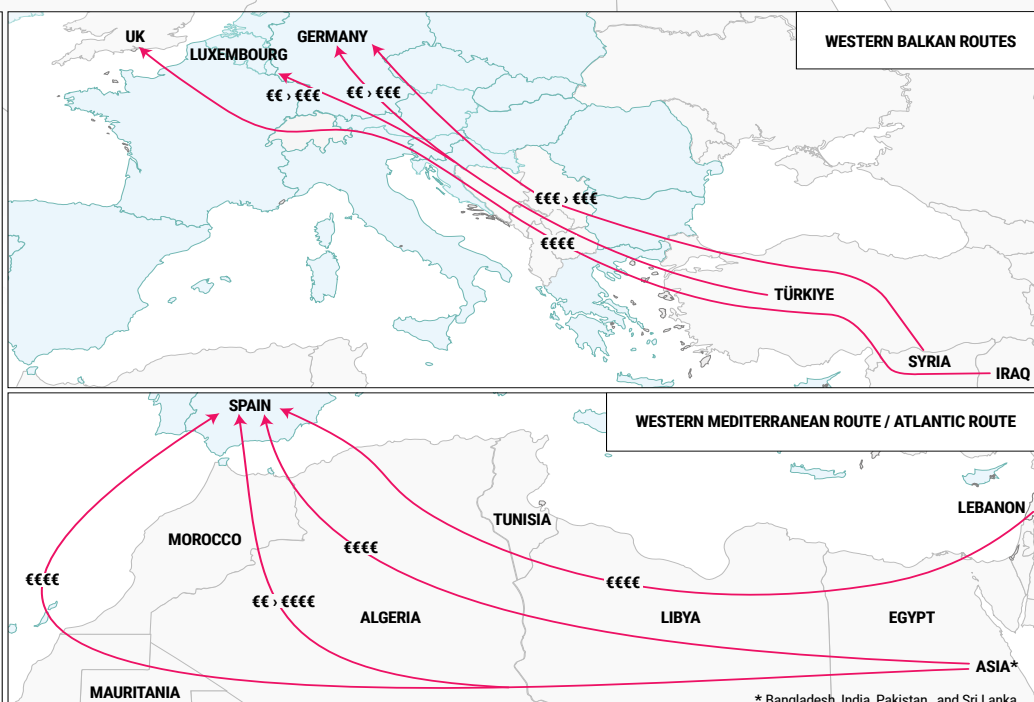
Counterfeit passport € 1 000 to 5 000

Fraudulent documents, accommodation in safe houses and arrangement of air transport from Greece to EU countries € 3 000 to 5 000

Payment to women to join marriages of convenience € 1 000 to 2 500

Smuggling with fraudulent documents from various EU countries to Ireland by air and to the UK over land € 8 000

Smuggling with fraudulent documents from Pakistan via Spain to Norway, Denmark, or Sweden € 2 300 to 27 500



Disclaimer: This map presents an overview of case examples of smuggling fees reported to the Europol in 2024. Fees depend on route complexity, mode of transportation, associated risks, and additional services such as accommodation or forged documentation and vary over time.

TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS:

Human trafficking involves the trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable individuals for the sole purpose of criminal profits.

Unlike migrant smuggling, victims of human trafficking are often tricked or forced into a country and are always exploited through sexual abuse, forced labour, begging or crime for the benefit of criminal groups.

In 2024, Europol detected the following trends in this crime area:

The evolution of transnational victim flows:

Criminal networks lure victims with false promises of legal employment or safe transit into the EU, many of whom are later subjected to abuse, forced labour, and sexual exploitation.

These victims originate mainly from Eastern European and non-EU countries, with various transit points and destinations often in Western European countries.

The diversification of criminal structures and exploitation:

Criminal networks continue to evolve by creating new organisational structures to support their specific needs, such as the creation of two operational cells (one for recruitment and transit, and another for exploitation) and shifting towards poly-criminality. This is particularly evident in a recent Europol-led crackdown on a criminal group composed of mostly Chinese nationals involved in sexual exploitation, money laundering, document fraud, and facilitation of irregular migration. In some cases, the entire trafficking process is outsourced to different actors operating independently and on demand for specific services.

There is also a wider range of exploitation, with victims increasingly being forced into sexual services, labour, and street-level crime.

The digital domain as the new battleground for traffickers:

Criminal networks approach their victims through social media platforms and messaging apps, with offers of employment and travel assistance. Once the victims have been trafficked, the perpetrators maintain digital

surveillance over them, restricting their movement and communication.

There are cases where criminals have drawn inspiration from social media influencers or content creator academies to teach other criminals how to lure and control victims online. These platforms offer perpetrators anonymity and efficiency, allowing them to securely advertise their services as well as arrange cross-border logistics and coordination.

The decentralisation of illicit profit flows:

Criminal networks use informal financial systems, crypto assets, and cash couriers to launder their profits. They also use legitimate businesses, such as travel agencies and estate agents, to further disguise these illicit earnings.

These funding methods create highly decentralised and layered financial trails, which law enforcement agencies use as a key means of disrupting transnational trafficking networks.

The shifting and growing threat:

Criminal networks are now more agile and better connected than ever, exploiting both vulnerable people and systemic vulnerabilities. This is clearly demonstrated in operations carried out in 2024, where human trafficking in the EU rapidly adapted in response to instability, migration flows, and increased connectivity.

In response, EU-wide coordination led by Europol continues to deliver results by targeting both the physical and digital nodes of the trafficking chain, strengthening cross-border cooperation.

COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN 2024:

188

cross-border operations supported.

3

operational taskforces supported, composed of a group of experts and resources formed to execute planned missions.

25

action days organised with law enforcement and judicial authorities to tackle high-risk criminal networks.

over
2.9K

SIENA messages received by Europol and accepted for further processing.

253

analytical and intelligence operational reports.

OUR RESPONSE:

Stepping up the response to migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings is a shared challenge for the EU, its Member States and partner countries. It demands a comprehensive and holistic approach, which combines international cooperation and coordination, both with partners and among EU Member States to break the criminal business model of smugglers and traffickers.

Some of Europol's recent Operational Taskforces (OTF) are:

→ Tackling migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean

On 9 April 2025 Italian law enforcement, supported by their Greek and German counterparts, arrested 7 key members of an Egyptian criminal network.

This network offered transport by sailboat from the Turkish coast to different Italian and Greek destinations, demanding payments between EUR 9 000 and 10 000 from each migrant.

Europol provided analytical support to the investigating countries, through intelligence and reports, and acted

as an information and coordination hub between all partners. Europol's experts in the fight against migrant smuggling analysed all information shared via SIENA and cross-checked it against Europol's databases.

This action day was part of an operational taskforce created at Europol between Italy and Greece in 2023. It is based on the [European Commission's 10-point plan for Lampedusa](#), which aims to reduce irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea and the EU.

→ EU-wide efforts against migrant smuggling network

On 20 November 2024, an EU-wide joint action day, led by Germany, resulted in the takedown of a Syrian migrant smuggling network which was also involved in weapons trafficking, and document fraud along the so-called Balkan route. This operation resulted in 25 arrests, with 3 high-value targets among them, and seizures of vehicles, electronic equipment, and cash.

The investigation targeted an organised criminal group that was allegedly active since 2021. The criminal network, spread across 20 countries, subcontracted local criminal groups to provide services such as transport and accommodation for their migrant smuggling operation.

Over 450 officers were deployed on the ground, with two experts from Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre. A Joint Investigation team set up by Eurojust, facilitated the judicial cooperation between countries.

This action day was part of an operational taskforce, made up of authorities from Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, the United Kingdom and other European countries. The information exchanged within this Taskforce, facilitated by Europol, revealed the dynamic operations of the investigated criminal network.

→ Crackdown on Chinese human trafficking ring

On 17 December 2024, law enforcement conducted a series of raids across 14 properties in different Spanish cities, and one in Croatia. This operation resulted in the seizure of EUR 180 000, weapons, passports, 10 high-end vehicles and the rescue of 33 victims.

The investigation targeted a criminal organisation, composed mainly of Chinese nationals, who profited from the sexual exploitation of women, as well as money laundering, document fraud and facilitation of irregular

migration. Victims were drawn into prostitution in Europe with promises of earning better wages quickly. Upon arrival, however, they were trapped in debt and exploitation.

This operation was part of a wider operational taskforce at Europol, dedicated to combating Chinese human trafficking networks. Involving 11 countries, the taskforce is focused on dismantling these criminal groups operating across Europe.



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