



# European Migrant Smuggling Centre

5<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL REPORT

**2021**





## EUROPEAN MIGRANT SMUGGLING CENTRE 5<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL REPORT – 2021

PDF | ISBN 978-92-95220-24-9 | ISSN 2600-3287 | doi: 10.2813/90877 | QL-AP-21-001-EN-N

© European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2021

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.

Cite this publication: Europol (2021), European Migrant Smuggling Centre - 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

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

[www.europol.europa.eu](http://www.europol.europa.eu)



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 1

### FOREWORD

Foreword Executive Director of Europol 04

Foreword Head of EMSC 05

## 2

### ACTIVITY REPORT

EMSC's performance 06

Operational highlights facilitated illegal immigration 08

Operational highlights trafficking in human beings 10

## 3

### INTELLIGENCE PICTURE

Migrant smuggling 12

Trafficking in human beings 14

## 4

### TRENDS AND MODI OPERANDI

Crime Priority: Migrant smuggling 15

Crime Priority: Trafficking in human beings 22

## 5

### WAY FORWARD

Expected challenges 26

Europol's reaction 28

# FOREWORD

## Catherine De Bolle

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPOL



---

I am pleased to present the 5th edition of the Annual Report of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre hosted at Europol.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to dominate many aspects of our lives in 2020, criminal networks continued with their activities in the areas of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings (THB).

The sustained demand for migrant smuggling services will allow the smuggling networks involved in these activities to maintain their criminal businesses. The perception of the EU as being economically, politically and environmentally more stable compared to many regions in the world is a powerful pull factor.

Every year, irregular migrants perish on their way to Europe or during secondary movements within the EU. In 2020, there have been more such tragic cases often linked to the dangerous activities of ruthless migrant smugglers.

THB continues to affect all Member States in 2020. The exploitation of all types of victims continues to pose a high threat in the EU.

In April 2021, Europol presented the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) 2021, which identified migrant smuggling and THB as key crime threats facing the EU. I am encouraged by the fact that these key threats will also be adopted as crime priorities for the 2022 – 2025 cycle of the European Multi-disciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

In 2021, the European Migrant Smuggling Centre continues to support Member States and partners in the fight against migrant smuggling and THB targeting the most threatening criminal networks and high-value targets involved.

Europol will continue to deliver the services and the operational support our law enforcement partners in the EU and beyond now rely on for their day-to-day work.

# FOREWORD

## Robert Crepinko

HEAD OF EMSC



One more year we are releasing our activity report, and this edition also shows the excellent work done by the EMSC, Member States and our operational partners. This is especially relevant due to the unexpected and cumbersome moments we are all experiencing since 2020, due to the impact of COVID 19. Definitely, 2020 has been heavily affecting our policing routines and working procedures, these unexpected developments are requiring robust, solid and resilient law enforcement responses, and we did it together

During 2020 the EMSC has supported a significant number of international investigations aimed to investigate and prosecute high value targets (HVT) posing a serious threat for the EU. I would like to

congratulate all the EU Member States and our operational partners for such as impressive and agile response, constantly supporting relevant investigations where Europol's EMSC is a trusted partner, allowing curbing many criminal networks.

Despite the pandemic, criminal networks have shown a solid footprint and networks involved in both criminal areas were already quick to adapt their *modi operandi* to the new reality, posing new challenges for all of us, such as the fuelled online environment increasingly used for recruiting victims or to advertise illicit services. Therefore we need to continue boosting and enhancing our operational responses, here, the EMSC will continue fully supporting you.

It is our pleasure to continue building strong partnerships with our operational stakeholders and to continue operationally evolving, providing strong support and disrupting criminal networks who are treating human beings as commodities and putting their lives in high risk.

Stay safe, stay strong and looking forward to continue with our cooperation.

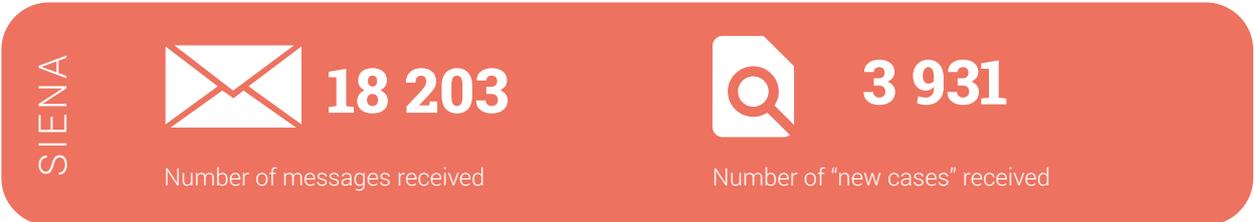
# ACTIVITY REPORT



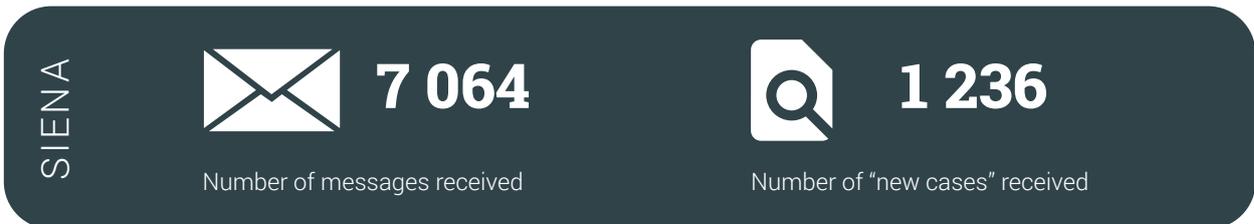
## EMSC's performance

While the COVID 19 pandemic has brought unprecedented travel restrictions, criminal networks have continued to thrive, displaying a high degree of adaptability and as such, Europol's operational support and services have been increasingly requested, despite the challenges in providing on-the-spot support.

**Facilitated Illegal Immigration - AP MIGRANT SMUGGLING**



**Trafficking in Human Beings - AP PHOENIX**



# Operational highlights facilitated illegal immigration

## OPERATION ALCATRAZ – ICEBERG<sup>1</sup>

Europol support led to the arrest of 47 individuals for smuggling Moroccan nationals into the EU.

The British Royal Gibraltar Police and the Spanish National Police, were supported by Europol with intelligence analysis, deployed a mobile office with real-time cross-checks against Europol databases, leading to the dismantling of a criminal network operating in Spain, Gibraltar and Morocco.

The criminal network supported migrants to fraudulently obtain British visas at the embassy in Rabat and facilitated them further to Europe. For these services, they charged approximately EUR 8 000 to EUR 9 000 in total. Once the visa was granted, the migrants were facilitated via plane or ferry from Morocco to Gibraltar, picked up by facilitators with off-road vehicles with tinted windows and brought to Spain. After a temporary stop in Spain, further travel to other EU Member States was organised.

## OPERATION SHERE KHAN<sup>2</sup>

A criminal network facilitated about 10 000 Iraqi-Kurdish, Syrian, Iranian and Afghan migrants from Le Mans and Poitiers in France to the United Kingdom.

For approximately EUR 7 000 per person, the facilitators transported the migrants at night, under life-threatening conditions, concealed in overcrowded refrigerated lorries. The criminal network collected an estimated EUR 70 million in profit, distributing their earnings via a hawala banking system run by a suspect.

Cooperation between the French and Dutch border guards and the French national police, with Europol's support, resulted in the arrest of 23 suspects (19 in France and four in the Netherlands), five house searches and the seizure of firearms and vehicles in one action day. Discovered migrants were brought to safety.

This case was also part of the EMPACT JOT Dunqett operational action.

## OPERATION HYDRA<sup>3</sup>

Another investigation by the Spanish police and supported by Europol resulted in 19 arrests, three house searches, the seizure of three cars, eight mobile devices, two hard discs and a server.

Situated in Spain and Morocco, the facilitators provided the migrants with cayucos – wooden boats similar to canoes. Migrants crossing the sea to the Canary Islands, under life-threatening conditions, were temporarily accommodated on Lanzarote in abandoned houses, campervans and motorhomes, before routing them by plane or ferry to their final destinations within the EU (France, Finland or Italy). Irregular migrants were equipped with look-alike or fraudulent documents and were charged EUR 1 000 to EUR 1 500 by the facilitators.

## OTF MELROSE<sup>4</sup>

The tragedy of Essex in the United Kingdom in October 2019, which led to the death of 39 Vietnamese in a refrigerated lorry, prompted international investigations against a criminal migrant smuggling network. Europol set up an Operational Task Force and facilitated the exchange of information between law enforcement authorities. Further analytical reports and the deployment of an expert to France, as well as coordinating and real-time cross-checking of information during the action day, led to the arrest of 26 suspects (13 in France and 13 Belgium) by an international Joint

Investigation Team. 27 house searches were performed. Moreover, three cars, money and electronic equipment were seized. A total of 21 irregular migrants were rescued.

The criminal network facilitated the transfer of mainly Vietnamese nationals, under dangerous conditions hidden in lorries, through France and Belgium across the English Channel to the United Kingdom. It is likely that the smugglers facilitated several dozens of migrants per day for several months.

# Operational highlights trafficking in human beings

## OPERATION CUMBIA<sup>5</sup>

A French-led investigation focused on a criminal network composed of Colombian nationals active since 2015. They recruited Colombian and other South American women to exploit them in prostitution in rented apartments in France. The network also arranged the journey from the victims' home countries to Europe by air, targeting airports in Spain and Switzerland. The victims were advertised on specific adult websites. The customers paid directly to the victims, who then handed over the total amount to the facilitators.

On 12 October 2020, France concluded an operational action day arresting eight suspects and rescuing 15 potential victims. Europol supported this transnational and complex investigation from the early stages, coordinating the information exchange and providing analytical support.

## OPERATION COSTA/VELA<sup>6</sup>

A large network exploiting young Romanian women was dismantled in Spain, Romania and the Czech Republic in an operation supported by Europol.

The operation resulted in the arrests of 14 suspects (seven in Romania and seven in Spain), the safeguard of 10 victims and the seizure of cash, jewellery, luxury cars and digital equipment. During the coordinated operation, 16 house searches were carried out in the Czech Republic, Romania and Spain.

Romanian members of the criminal network, using the 'lover boy' method, seduced young women and, creating a dependant manipulative relationship between victim and exploiter, forced them into prostitution. The victims were often drugged, threatened, abused and trafficked among the members of the network for up to EUR 6 000 each. The women were also regularly moved from one location to another and one country

to another as a strategy to minimise the risks of detection from law enforcement. The network is believed to have been operating in other EU countries. More than 40 women have been identified as victims of sexual exploitation of the two criminal networks.

The criminal network was laundering the money through the purchase of real estate, expensive jewellery and vehicles. The profit from sexual exploitation was also used to create active checking accounts for drug use and gambling.

# INTELLIGENCE PICTURE

## Migrant smuggling

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that global crises do not significantly disrupt migration flows. After an initial slow-down during the first lockdown in March and April 2020, migrant smuggling activities quickly resumed. Criminal networks had new opportunities to demonstrate their adaptability, boosting new routes such as the revived Western African route, and adjusting their *modi operandi* to movement restrictions and enhanced border controls.

Facilitation of **secondary movements** of irregular migrants already present in the EU and **legalisation of residence status** are key threats to the EU. Abuse of asylum procedures and of loopholes in legislation applicable to entry to and legalisation of stay in the EU are instruments on which criminal networks active in migrant smuggling systematically capitalise.

**Facilitation of secondary movements** is diverse and sometimes multidirectional, with significant differences across nationalities of suspects and smuggled migrants. Smuggling networks continue to exploit

routes departing from the first entry points in the EU (Spain, Italy, Greece) to destination countries as France, Germany, the UK and others, facilitating secondary movements by land, on foot or by vehicles, boats and plane. In 2020, the involvement of criminal networks was most visible in arranging transit via the Western Balkans region, towards Germany and Italy, as well as the United Kingdom. Running a profitable business generating millions of euros in illicit profits, criminal networks facilitating the journey of irregular migrants within the EU used the opportunities recently offered by the large number of irregular migrants stranded in transit countries on account of COVID-19 measures. Facilitated secondary movements easily remain under the radar, aided by EU's efficient transport infrastructure and the use of simple but effective countermeasures such as built-in hiding places, rental cars or forerunners.

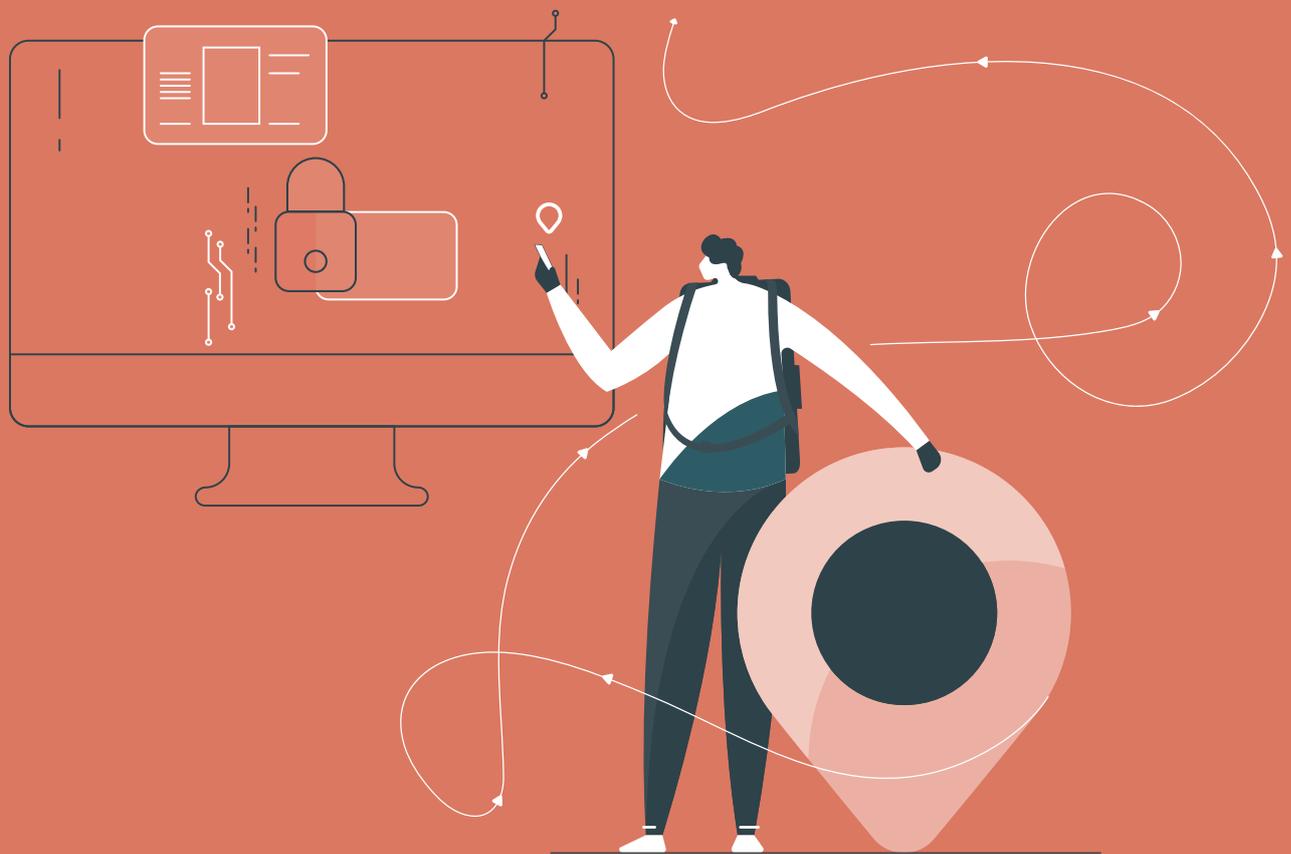
Facilitation of illegal immigration unfolds in an increasingly **networked environment**, with document fraud and legislation expertise often provided as a service. Similarly, the

use of legal business structures, corruption and money laundering form the criminal infrastructure sustaining smugglers' operations.

Migrant smugglers treat **irregular migrants as commodities**, often prioritising the **aim of maximising profits over the risks** to the migrants' physical and psychological health. Migrant smugglers frequently employ direct violence or the threat of violence against migrants, against law enforcement officers when avoiding apprehension and occasionally against other smugglers active in the same area. Furthermore, smugglers increasingly endanger the lives of migrants

at risk by using unseaworthy vessels or concealing them in small confined spaces for prolonged periods.

**Digital solutions, encryption** and opportunities offered by the **online environment** act as strong enablers of migrant smuggling, used in all stages of criminal operations, from advertising and recruiting of irregular migrants, to guidance and sharing of forged documents and instructions. The facilitation of illegal immigration unfolds in an increasingly networked environment, with document fraud and legislation expertise provided as a service.



# Trafficking in human beings

Trafficking in human beings (THB) is a core activity of serious and organised crime in the EU and is set to remain a threat to the EU for the near future, with victims exploited by criminal networks originating from all over the world.

The entire process of trafficking a victim currently features a number of online components, both on the surface and dark web, which is another development set to become even more pronounced, in the aftermath of a pronounced shift towards the online environment driven by COVID-19.

Traffickers **use online platforms and services to identify victims**, orchestrate THB for sexual exploitation and **advertise the services** of victims. The use of websites to advertise the sexual services of victims to clients has become a fundamental feature of this type of exploitation.

One of the most frequently reported modus operandi for the recruitment of victims for sexual exploitation remained the lover-boy method, with offenders reverting increasingly to psychological pressure to the detriment of direct physical abuse.

Exploiters increasingly seek to exploit

their victims in the context of supposedly voluntary business agreements. As part of these arrangements, the victims agree to engage in prostitution and hand over a share of their earnings in exchange for protection and support with administrative issues such as tax declarations, registration with chambers of commerce, or pension arrangements.

While still largely underreported, trafficking for labour exploitation continues to primarily take place in cash-intensive and less controlled businesses (e.g. agricultural and construction sectors, cleaning services and the food processing industry). However, labour exploitation in the agricultural sector remains under-investigated and under-reported in the EU.

Legal business structures are commonly used to organise the exploitation of THB victims, while document fraud is used to legalise the stay of non-EU victims in the EU, and to obscure the real identity of victims and traffickers.

After sexual and labour-related exploitation, criminals increasingly focus on forced begging and forced criminality, particularly targeting vulnerable victims, like minors and disabled persons.

# TRENDS AND MODI OPERANDI

## Crime Priority: Migrant smuggling



### MODUS OPERANDI: CONCEALMENT IN VEHICLES

Smuggling of irregular migrants concealed in vehicles is the most common practice for the facilitation of illegal immigration in the Western Balkans and neighbouring countries. Migrant smugglers are frequently reported employing risky behaviour when trying to hide the highest possible number of irregular migrants inside a compartment of a vehicle to maximise their profits. Irregular migrants are frequently transported in locked, dark and airless cargo compartments, in crowded, inhuman conditions that are unsuitable for passenger transport. The types of compartments include cargo bays of lorries, trailers and transporter vans, hidden, purpose-built compartments in cars, vans or lorries, as well as boots and even engine compartments. Irregular migrants are usually transported for several hours without stopping, in order to avoid apprehension.

Along the Western Balkan Routes, in 2020, smuggling with this modus operandi was on an upward trend. The number of cases reported in the fourth quarter of 2020 increased three-fold compared to the same period in 2019. In addition, the number of cases doubled in 2020, compared to 2019, while the number of facilitated irregular migrants tripled.

The top five nationalities of intercepted drivers during the last quarter of 2020 were Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish and Croatian nationals, with a similar situation recorded for vehicle registration countries. The number of cases in which a forerunner car was used has also increased.

Criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling use large vehicles to transport numerous irregular migrants. A forerunner car is often used to clear the road ahead of police controls. The analysis of contributed cases shows two diverging approaches: while some drivers appear to diligently follow traffic regulations trying not to draw attention, others – specifically drivers of the transport vehicles – are reckless in their behaviour, attempting to avoid being caught by police. These drivers drive fast and dangerously; in the event of police controls, they crash or threaten to crash into police vehicles and the facilitated irregular migrants are exposed to serious traffic accidents. At the same time, some forerunner cars intentionally commit traffic violations in order to avoid police checks for the following transport vehicles, or obstruct the police when stopping the transport vehicles, in that way securing the movement of irregular migrants<sup>7</sup>.

While drivers of the forerunner cars frequently seem to be nationals of the country in which they operate, the drivers of the transport vehicles appear to be more often nationals of countries of origin. In Greece, drivers reported were often nationals of the Western Balkan region or with other non-European nationalities, entering Greece illegally. The drivers are usually not the owners of the cars, and the vehicles were registered normally in various EU countries.



Pic. 1. Intercepted irregular migrants crowded in a van. Source: Croatian authorities.

Pic. 2 and 3. Accident of a truck transporting irregular migrants. Source: Croatian authorities



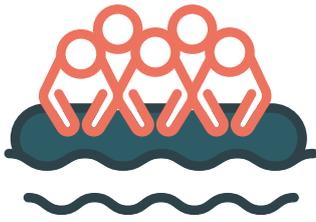
## SMALL BOATS VIA THE ENGLISH CHANNEL TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

In 2020, there was a significant upward trend in the phenomenon of using small boats for illegal immigration from mainland Europe across the English Channel to the UK. The increasing number of incidents with small boats (Rigid Inflatable Boats (RIB) or Rigid Hull Inflatable Boats (RHIB) across the English Channel has shown a consolidated trend throughout 2020, observed since November 2019. It has thus become the main modus operandi employed by migrant-smuggling networks offering smuggling services from the EU to the United Kingdom.

Most departures took place from the north of France, in areas close to Calais and Dunkirk and, to a much lesser extent, from the Belgian coast. From January to mid-December 2020, law enforcement authorities of the countries in question registered more than 1 300 incidents involving more than 15 000 irregular migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats. These numbers include attempts detected by the French authorities, as well as successful crossings detected on British territory.<sup>8</sup>

In order to tackle this phenomenon, a proposal for an operational action was tabled in the framework of the Operational Action Plan 2021 for the priority Facilitation of illegal immigration in the EMPACT framework. The objective of the action is to tackle migrant smuggling in small boats across the English Channel in a more systematic and effective way.

The Joint Intelligence Cell (JIC) was operationalised in July 2020 between French and British law enforcement authorities. Following the approval of the partners involved, Europol has joined efforts, enhancing cooperation and continuous data flow. A dedicated Task Force has been set up in the EMSC, to focus and coordinate existing analytical capabilities, between experts from Joint Operational Team (JOT) MARE<sup>9</sup> and EMSC's operational teams. The aim of the Task Force is to assess the developments on the ground and reflect their outcomes in investigations, to timely process information related to the topic and to keep a constant contact with Liaison Bureaus' representatives.



## MIGRANT SMUGGLING VIA THE WESTERN AFRICAN ROUTE TO THE CANARY ISLANDS

In 2020, more than 23 000 new arrivals of irregular migrants were registered to the Canary Islands, almost a 10-fold increase compared to the same period in 2019<sup>10</sup>. The peak was recorded during October and November 2020, with 8 506 and 9 662 new arrivals, respectively.

Departures from Morocco to the mainland of Spain have significantly decreased, since Moroccan authorities reinforced surveillance and police operations in the northern part of the country (areas traditionally used by smugglers as departure points towards southern coasts of the Spanish mainland) to counter the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This definitely had an impact on the increased use of routes from Moroccan southern regions and neighbouring countries (Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia) and from Algeria to Spain.

Migrant smugglers played a significant role in this long and risky crossing from the region, to the Canary Islands, by organising sea crossings in fishing boats (*cayucos*) and creating new synergies and opportunities such as the trade of *cayucos* to Senegal produced in Gambia at lower manufacturing prices<sup>11</sup>.

In some cases, since this route is highly dangerous, the larger part of the smuggling fee is paid upon successfully reaching the Canary Islands (for example, EUR 500 is paid in advance and EUR 1 800 upon successful facilitation).



Pic 4. Cayuco arriving to the Canary Islands. Source: Spanish authorities



## THE DIGITISATION OF MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS

Social media platforms and messaging communications (often encrypted) are widely used by smugglers to coordinate and communicate before and during smuggling operations. Such channels are also used to advertise services and fraudulent documents. The use of mobile applications has been detected to share maps with pre-established routes and safer transit points along borders, with live sharing of secure places to obtain logistic support during the journey (accommodation, water, food). Closed groups in social media and communication applications are particularly popular among document forgers and suppliers. In addition, burner smartphone applications<sup>12</sup> are used by smugglers, enabling the random creation and use of temporary virtual phone numbers.

Social media is also used by criminals to recruit and offer services to potential victims. Employment advertisement on social media targets irregular migrants, often for further exploitation, either for sexual services or for labour. This occurs particularly in cases where irregular migrants are bound by the debt of fees for lengthy and complex journeys.

Criminal networks involved in trafficking of human beings (THB) have increasingly become technology-savvy. In October 2020, Europol published a report on digitisation of THB, aiming to inform the law enforcement community involved in the fight against international THB on how modern communication technologies (especially the use of internet and social media), impact the way in which criminal groups operate. The advantages of technology for traffickers include increased anonymity, the ability to take part in real-time yet encrypted communications, the possibility of reaching a broader audience (in terms of victims and clients), geographical mobility, and the ability to control victims from a distance.<sup>13</sup>



## DOCUMENT FRAUD/ VISA FRAUD

Document fraud entails the production of false documents as well as the use of genuine documents obtained by means of deception, misrepresentation or theft. False documents can be complete counterfeits or partly forged. They can also be altered genuine stolen documents (including blank documents) or pseudo documents.

Document fraud continues to be a key enabler for the facilitation of illegal immigration. Enhanced surveillance at the EU's external border and improved security features for identity documents will continue to drive the demand for fraudulent documents.

Fraudulent documents are multi-purpose criminal tools and each document can be used repeatedly to support different criminal activities. Identity documents are in high demand and they are the most commonly traded type of fraudulent document. 35% of the documents reported to Europol were identity cards, followed by passports (31%), driving licences (15%) and residence permits (7%).<sup>14</sup> Most reported misused identity cards were of Romanian, Greek and Italian origin and the most misused reported passports were Italian, Greek and Israeli. Most documents are counterfeit or forged, while misused genuine documents have been reported with a smaller incidence.<sup>15</sup>

As an information hub, the EMSC received in 2020 several contributions on operations relating to document fraud. On average, one fourth of the contributions addressed to the Analysis Project Migrant Smuggling have a document fraud component. The intelligence picture reveals the following developments and variations in the criminal landscape:

- **Abuse of labour provisions:** criminal groups often supply workers with counterfeit Romanian and Bulgarian identity cards, with construction and renovation companies often involved in the criminal scheme.
- **Sham marriage** networks facilitate illegal immigration into the EU by setting up marriages of convenience between third-country nationals and EU nationals.
- Over recent years, Germany and other EU destination countries have increasingly detected the use of fraudulently obtained visas for entry into the Schengen area. The general modus operandi shows that the issuance of Schengen visas is based on forged breeder documents.

- Europol has recorder several cases linked to the **fraudulent use of genuine identity or travel documents**. 89% concern the use of look-alike documents, in which genuine documents are used by someone else than the legitimate owner, based on physical resemblance. These are mostly lost or stolen documents that end up in the hands of criminal networks.
- Criminal networks produce false documents in **fully equipped print shops and ship them via courier companies**. In 2020, EMSC supported the operational activities of MS, targeting and dismantling four print shops in which hundreds of travel and identification documents were produced for the facilitation of migrant smuggling activities.
- **Fraudulent documents are traded online in an increasing number**. A number of messages received by the EMSC are linked to social media and instant communication platforms, surface or dark web sites used by criminals to advertise and trade a wide range of documents, allowing forgers and sellers to receive orders directly from potential customers.

Key locations for the production and/or distribution of identity documents are closely related to hubs for migrant smuggling. Many criminal networks active in document fraud operate from there, providing documents to migrants and sending documents via parcel services or couriers. Similarly, criminals use parcel services to ship stolen, forged and counterfeit documents to migrant smugglers and/or directly to irregular migrants in both transit countries and EU destination countries. Social media platforms and encrypted messenger apps are widely used to promote, trade and order fraudulent documents.



Pic. 5. Documents and devices seized during an action day. Source: French authorities

# Crime Priority: Trafficking in human beings



## FORCED CRIMINALITY AND OTHER FORMS OF EXPLOITATION

Criminals abuse their victims for forced begging, forced criminality, trafficking of organs and tissues and, at times, to obtain financial and social benefits using their identities. Female victims are trafficked to participate in illegal surrogacy programmes, selling their new-borns, concluding sham marriages and as victims of domestic slavery. As with other types of THB, the recruitment of victims increasingly takes place online. Victims are lured with false job offers, advertisements to marry strangers and offers to purchase babies or organs. Most trafficked victims are homeless, suffer from mental and physical disabilities, are single parents with children or are elderly.

### **Child trafficking**

Child trafficking is a heinous crime targeting a particularly vulnerable section of society. The trafficking and exploitation of underage victims occurs across the EU and targets both EU and non-EU victims. Criminals traffic children for various types of exploitation. Female victims face sexual exploitation and forced marriage to adult men. Traffickers exploit children as domestic servants, or force them to beg, pickpocket, shoplift or sell stolen commodities. Children are also trafficked through illegal adoption schemes.

**Criminal networks comprised of both EU and non-EU nationals are involved in child trafficking in the EU and can vary in type and aim:**



Criminal networks sexually exploiting both adults and minors;



Family clans abusing their children, or children of other families, and forcing them into begging, criminality and sexual abuse;



Criminal groups which are mainly involved in other criminal activities and make use of vulnerable children, often of non-EU origin, to perpetrate crimes.

## **Illegal adoption and surrogate motherhood**

Different EU countries have reported cases of exploitation of pregnant women and the subsequent sale of new-born babies. The modus operandi in general foresees the recruitment of women to act as surrogate mothers, sometimes via the internet. The women are then medically treated for increased fertility and receive in-vitro fertilisation in specialised clinics. Towards the end of the pregnancy, they are brought into the EU or to another EU country for childbirth and registration of the child. The children are then either sold with fraudulent documentation for illegal adoption, or the fatherhood is claimed fraudulently at registration of the new-borns, and the supposed fathers take the new-borns with them to yet another country.



## NATIONALS OF SOUTH-AMERICAN ORIGIN AS POTENTIAL VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING

During the first semester of 2020, there was a significant increase of contributions to Europol regarding cases of sexual exploitation involving suspects and potential female victims of THB from South America (mainly from Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Paraguay and Peru).

A common factor witnessed in these cases is that victims often work in hidden prostitution circles and are accommodated in rented apartments, making it more difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect and protect potential victims.

In addition, the conditions for sexual workers in this underground prostitution business are often outside any regulatory control, as they are exposed to serious abuse and health risks.



## NIGERIAN CONFRATERNITIES

Nigerian criminal networks are largely active in THB for the prostitution market in Europe, posing a great challenge to EU law enforcement agencies since Nigerian networks have achieved significant influence in EU organised crime by regular cooperation with local criminal groups. Besides THB, Nigerian Confraternities are known to be active in other criminal businesses in the EU, such as drug trafficking, fraud, money laundering, migrant smuggling, corruption and currency counterfeiting.

Europol has been supporting several priority investigations involving a wider range of destination and transit countries used by Nigerian human traffickers.



## CRIME IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The use of digital solution and of the online environment has influenced the traditional structure and the division of tasks within trafficking networks. Criminals known to be exploiting their victims through brothels, street or window prostitution, have shifted to online advertisement and extensive use of the internet and social media, for both recruitment and exploitation purposes. The online environment is perceived as more secure for clients, as well as for criminals. Skype, Viber, WhatsApp, Snapchat, WeChat, as well as Telegram are particularly sought after as they allow encrypted communication. They are widely used for communication among criminals, but also to arrange

appointments with clients – usually following the first contact established on the internet, and to exchange information with victims (regarding the arrival of customers, amount of earnings, locations, etc.).

People are spending more time on the internet throughout the day, using social media and applications to connect with each other and to look for opportunities online, both in terms of relationships or employment. Social media has become a powerful tool for criminal networks involved in THB and there is evidence that it is used as a virtual catalogue for traffickers to identify potential victims. An increase was recorded in activities related to the online distribution of child abuse material and the conversations of potential offenders around the increased accessibility and vulnerability of children online due to isolation, reduced supervision and greater online exposure.

With the use of the internet and social media, traffickers can model their recruitment strategy upon the behavioural traits of their victims. Two main ways of finding victims were identified: active recruitment and the passive recruitment.

Active recruitment resembles the 'hook & line fishing' technique: criminals produce false job advertisements (used as bait) to trigger the interest of potential victims. Trusted job portals and online marketplaces on well-known social media platforms are used, as they are commonly considered by victims to be safe places to look for jobs.

Passive recruitment takes the form of 'net fishing': criminal recruiters roam the internet and social media and reply to announcements posted by international job seekers. After a short conversation, recruiters usually ask potential victims for a fee in order to secure their spot abroad and start organising their travel to the country of destination. In some cases, trafficked victims arrive at the final location and discover that there is no actual job, they have been defrauded and their contact has disappeared.

# WAY FORWARD

## Expected challenges

Migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings have been highlighted by the SOCTA 2021 as two of the key priority areas in the coming years to be further tackled via joint EU efforts. This outcome was based on the assessment of past experience and expected evolution for the future, and thus highlights the need to continue our efforts in ensuring a prompt and cohesive response, particularly in the light of the impact of COVID-19 on our society, our capabilities and on criminal strategies.

Developments in the spread of COVID-19 and in the speed of vaccination programmes in different countries will constitute strong pull factors for people willing to migrate from countries with less developed health systems. The impact of COVID-19 on labour markets in certain countries will also create additional motivation for economic migrants. The sharp increase in unemployment rates already seen in many parts of the world is likely to increase cross-border trafficking in persons from countries experiencing the fastest and longest-lasting drops in employment.

The global pandemic has inevitably and significantly impacted trafficking in human beings. In sexual exploitation, direct contact between traffickers, victims and clients will most probably continue to decrease, with more operations carried out in the online environment, while the economic effects of the pandemic, which are already visible, will probably drive increased demand in labour exploitation.

Experience has shown that in times of crisis, organised criminal groups react quickly, adapt and thrive. Furthermore, movement restrictions and enhanced controls at entry points have led smugglers to revert to more dangerous routes in harsher conditions, where migrants are exposed to violence, abuse and the risk of contracting the new virus. Smugglers continue to seize the opportunities created by people's need to escape poverty, lack of employment, natural disasters, conflict or persecution, in the absence or unavailability of legal migration mechanisms.

Bottlenecks and migrants stranded on route may trigger new massive and coordinated

marches towards the EU. Such cases have already happened in Greece, were planned in Serbia and have been seen in South America. For example, the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where COVID-19 cases have been on the rise in reception facilities, is triggering constant smuggling opportunities with a subsequent impact on neighbouring countries.

Criminals are increasingly networked, relying more and more on external service providers and experts to support their operations. Both migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings vastly rely on the online environment and on widely available digital solutions to advertise and orchestrate crime from a distance. The COVID-19 pandemic has further boosted the shift of criminal activities into the digital realm, with criminals not only surviving but also prospering in such conditions. It is thus expected that new ways of capitalising on these opportunities will be found, posing a continuous challenge to law enforcement agencies in terms of prevention, detection and deterrence.

From an operational perspective, as long as the pandemic persists, on-the-spot activities from law enforcement officers will be subject to restrictions and limitations, to preserve the health of public servants. Similarly, Europol's deployments and operational activities on the ground will also be subject to regulations and restrictions in the host countries.

# Europol's reaction

In the face of the challenges triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, Europol will continue to adapt and enforce a flexible and agile way to facilitate information exchange and operational support for Member States and its partners.

In order to direct EU investigations and address the most significant threats emerging from large-scale migrant smuggling, prioritisation processes must target high-risk organised networks active across the EU and the disruption of criminal business models – especially those that foster collaboration between several organised crime groups or networks.

Our strategy to tackle criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings focuses on improved investigations into high-risk actors, corruption, legal business structure and financial processes accompanying crime, tackling crime enablers, and optimising law enforcement responses, by strengthening the cooperation framework with MS, third countries, international organisations and the private sector.

Such prioritisation may be supported and driven, among others, by a high-value target selection process established by the Member States with the support of Europol. An integral part of investigations should be asset-tracing and financial investigations leading to the effective confiscation of proceeds of these crimes, in the framework of a coherent action against parallel supporting activities, such as document fraud. Furthermore, developing a set of instruments to tackle the impact of digitalisation and online markets exploited by criminals will make it possible to bridge the gap between law enforcement intervention and developments in the criminal environment.

Our joint reaction must additionally rely on ensuring a structured coordination and cooperation approach, not only in operational activities and investigations between Member States, Europol and its operational partners, relevant third countries and private stakeholders, but also on matters related to information exchange among all relevant law enforcement actors.

# ENDNOTES

- 1** Europol, '47 arrests for smuggling Moroccan citizens to the EU', 13 January 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/47-arrests-for-smuggling-moroccan-citizens-to-eu>
- 2** Europol, '23 arrests in France and the Netherlands as Iraqi-Kurdish smuggling network busted', 23 January 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/23-arrests-in-france-and-netherlands-iraqi-kurdish-smuggling-network-busted>
- 3** Europol, '19 arrests for smuggling irregular migrants from Morocco to the Spanish Canary Islands', 17 December 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/19-arrests-for-smuggling-irregular-migrants-morocco-to-spanish-canary-islands>
- 4** Europol, '26 arrested for smuggling irregular migrants through Belgium and France', 27 May 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/26-arrested-for-smuggling-irregular-migrants-through-belgium-and-france>, May 2020
- 5** Europol, 'Web-enabled sexual exploitation gang taken down by French police', 20 October 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/web-enabled-sexual-exploitation-gang-taken-down-french-police>
- 6** Europol, 'Fake love: devious men luring young women into prostitution busted in Spain and Romania', 11 March 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/fake-love-devious-men-luring-young-women-prostitution-busted-in-spain-and-romania>
- 7** Europol information.
- 8** Europol, 'Migrant smuggling: the use of small boats to cross the English channel', 14 January 2021, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/migrant-smuggling-use-of-small-boats-to-cross-english-channel-0>
- 9** JOT MARE was established on March 2015 to deliver an intelligence-led response to the organised sea smuggling phenomenon in which large capacity maritime vessels were used and was extended to any other sea asset used.
- 10** <http://www.interior.gob.es/prensa/balances-e-informes/>
- 11** Europol information.
- 12** Applications installed on mobile phones allowing the creation of temporary/virtual numbers that are not associated with the mobile phone itself. A so-called burner phone app doesn't reveal the name on caller ID and can be erased at any time.
- 13** Europol, 2020, 'The challenges of countering human trafficking in the digital era', [News article, 18 October 2020] accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/challenges-of-countering-human-trafficking-in-digital-era>
- 14** Europol data.
- 15** A counterfeit document is an unauthorised reproduction of an authentic/original document, entirely produced by a fraudster. A forged document is an unauthorised alteration of an authentic/original document lawfully issued by different means (photo substitution, data alteration, page substitution...)

