

A complex, ruthless and multinational migrant-smuggling network has developed around Europe's unprecedented migration crisis, thus generating billions of euros for the criminal groups involved.

In 2014, the number of irregular migrants arriving in the EU surged, reaching more than one million migrants the following year. Europol believes this trend of rapidly increasing numbers is set to continue.

The facilitation of illegal immigration is one of the EU's priorities in the fight against serious and organised crime as part of [EMPACT 2022 - 2025](#).

This development has had a profound impact on Europe's criminal landscape, with criminal networks substantially increasing their involvement in migrant smuggling. More than 90 % of the migrants travelling to the EU used facilitation services. In most cases, these services were offered and provided by criminal groups.

Criminal networks exploit the desperation and vulnerability of migrants seeking to escape armed conflict, persecution and deprivation. They offer a broad range of facilitation services such as transportation, accommodation and fraudulent documents at excessively high prices. In many cases, migrants are forced to pay for these services by means of illegal labour. Europol expects this exploitation to further increase in scale in 2016.

Organised crime networks as well as individual criminal entrepreneurs are profiting from mass migration. In 2015, criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling are estimated to have had a turnover of between EUR 3–6 billion. These earnings strengthen criminal networks and have a significant negative long-term impact on Europe's economy.

The turnover from this highly attractive business [could double or triple](#) if the scale of the current migration crisis persists. A knock-on effect could be an increase in the exploitation of labour, where migrants may be forced to work to pay off their large debts with the smugglers.

TO THE FORE

Migrant smuggling networks have proven flexible and resilient, adapting to law enforcement actions by quickly changing the routes they use to smuggle migrants to the EU. These routes are constantly diversifying and changing. More than ever before, law enforcement authorities have to rely on situational awareness and an intelligence picture that is updated in real time and that can be maintained only through effective intelligence sharing.

As noted above, the facilitation of illegal immigration is one of the [EMPACT](#) priorities, Europol's priority crime areas, under the 2018-2021 EU Policy Cycle.

Through its [European Migrant Smuggling Centre \(EMSC\)](#), established in 2016, Europol is coordinating the collective response of law enforcement in Member States in countering the organised criminal groups orchestrating the illegal entry of migrants into the EU on a massive scale.

EMSC experts and analysts provide operational and analytical support, while Europol specialists are present at migrant entry hotspots in Greece and Italy.

In [one 2016 operation](#), police and border-management forces from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Switzerland joined forces in a 36-hour-long action along the Western Balkan route. The EMSC's Mobile Analyst team (EMAST) was deployed to the main criminal hubs in Germany, Austria and Hungary to facilitate the real-time exchange of information and to perform live cross-matching. The operation resulted in the arrest of 39 migrant smugglers and 580 smuggled migrants.

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