

Migrant smuggling on board international trains



Intelligence Notification



EMSC
European Migrant
Smuggling Centre

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Background

Data contributions from several EU law enforcement agencies show increased detections of irregular migrants on board international freight and passenger trains, along the Western Balkan corridor or from Italy across the Alps to northern EU countries.

The modi operandi of most of the incidents indicate the involvement of organised crime groups operating along the transit routes, with the sole focus of making profits and with no regard for the safety and security of the migrants.



Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkan corridor



The journeys of irregular migrants primarily originating from **Afghanistan**, but also **Syria and Algeria**, are clandestinely facilitated from international freight train terminals in Greece or Serbia, and in many instances the trains travel to or through Germany. In many cases detections happen by accident or because migrants make their presence known to authorities due to urgent health needs, or genuinely believing they have reached their final destination.

In some cases, as many as 94 migrants have been apprehended or suspected to have travelled in the same train, but were divided into smaller groups and spread around several train carriages to mitigate detection as far as possible. Prices charged by smugglers vary widely and reports received by Europol indicate that irregular migrants pay up to EUR 1000 per person for facilitation services.

A common feature of this modus operandi is the apparent integrity of the customs seals, indicating an increased degree of planning and coordination. In one case migrants were loaded into shipping containers, which, once placed on the freight trains, had the doors facing each other. The migrants could not leave the containers until they were unloaded, making it difficult to conduct in-depth inspections and, at the same time, exemplifying the little regard for the safety of the migrants. In many instances the cargo transported is, from the onset, acknowledged to be highly toxic.

Another incident of smuggling in tanker carriages was where efforts had been made to clean the carriages and fit them with facilities to allow people to easily embark and disembark, again demonstrating the involvement of criminal networks.

Given the complexity of the railway network in Europe, the duration of journeys vary and in several cases there has been evidence¹ of migrants spending several days locked in train carriages. Depending on the type of cargo transported there have been instances where migrant's lives were at risk and once rescued required urgent medical attention, or migrants lost their lives while travelling in hazardous conditions or during the unloading of cargo.

¹ Clothing, packed food and water, improvised sleeping facilities.

Central Mediterranean route

Facilitated illegal immigration, taking the shape of **'self-sustained' smuggling**, appears to be more prevalent on this migration corridor. Most trains where irregular migrants were detected generally formed in Italy and were scheduled to transit several European countries before reaching their final destinations.

The irregular migrants usually board trains at technical stops and hide in or under the cargo – for example under vehicles or in the wheels of large industrial vehicles transported on the train carriages, or on top of open train carriages transporting various cargo. Hence, migrants were frequently exposed to adverse weather conditions until disembarkation or discovery by law enforcement officials.

Eritrean irregular migrants predominantly use this route; other common countries of origin are Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq and Nigeria. When detected at intermediary points on their journeys, they usually apply for international protection.

Smuggling via international passenger trains also appears to be reported more often in connection with the Central Mediterranean route, presumably due to assumed less rigid travel restrictions inside the Schengen area. In a number of instances this type of smuggling has been combined with the use and/or abuse of forged or falsified travel documents – forged visas applied to the irregular migrants' own passports or forged travel documents issued by countries in the EU.

Third movements

Facilitating illegal migration via train, for the third movements of irregular migrants, was in the past directly associated with the establishment of informal camps along the migration routes. The dismantling of these camps triggered a decrease in detections. This feature, therefore, is likely to resurface should unofficial migrant camps be re-established.

A distinctive feature of these cases was that the irregular migrants/failed asylum applicants were in most cases accompanied by the smuggler who was usually of the same nationality as the irregular migrants and, in most cases was enjoying the free right of residence and movement within the EU.

Europol is sharing knowledge with EU law enforcement authorities on trends connected to migrant smuggling on trains, so that appropriate measures can be taken, working alongside the relevant rail authorities.



Eisenhowerlaan 73 2517 KK Den Haag