

Intelligence notification

The Hague, January 2021

Ref. 153/2020

Operations Directorate

Migrant smuggling: the use of small boats to cross the English Channel

Background

The United Kingdom (UK) is among the preferred destination countries for irregular migrants travelling to Europe with the help of migrant smuggling networks. These irregular migrants travel to the UK either directly from non-EU countries or indirectly as part of secondary movements via the EU. Organised crime groups active in this field have been using various *modi operandi* to cross the English Channel. For many years, the smuggling of irregular migrants on lorries from Belgium, France and the Netherlands was the most common *modus operandi*. The use of small boats and other types of maritime vessels only occurred occasionally.

What is happening?

A first sharp increase was recorded in October 2018, and since 2019, the number of incidents involving migrant smuggling in small boats (rigid inflatable boats or rigid hull inflatable boats) across the English Channel has been increasing. This trend has continued and the number of incidents has further significantly increased throughout 2020. In 2020, it was the main *modus operandi* employed by migrant smuggling networks offering smuggling services from the EU to the UK and more commonly encountered than the facilitation in lorries or other vehicles using the Channel Tunnel¹.



Figure 1: A small boat seized during an action day in September 2020 (Source: French National Police)

Where it is happening?

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 concerned countries registered more than 1 300 incidents involving more than 15 000 irregular migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats².

¹ This intelligence notification is based on information available at Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre and provided by EU Member States and the United Kingdom.

² Contribution from an EU Member State: includes successful crossings, attempted crossings or discovery of nautical equipment for crossing.

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Why is this happening?

A number of factors have prompted the increasing use of small boats to transport irregular migrants from continental Europe to the UK. At the end of February 2020, more systematic customs controls were introduced in the Channel Tunnel between Calais and Dover (UK) as the UK entered the transition period as part of its withdrawal from the EU. Measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 affected the dynamics of regular movements. These factors and the existing 65km of fence securing the main roads towards between Calais and the Channel Tunnel have made migrant smuggling in lorries, previously the most common modus operandi in this region, increasingly more difficult to organise and less profitable for migrant smugglers. In addition, recent tragedies linked to migrant smuggling in confined compartments may deter migrant smugglers from employing this modus operandi. Migrant smugglers and organised crime groups have once again shown flexibility and adaptability by using small boats instead of lorries. Furthermore, favourable weather conditions during the year, simple practical implementation and a high success rate made this modus operandi even more appealing for organised crime groups.

What is the involvement of organised crime groups?

Several organised crime groups are involved in providing cheap rubber boats and engines. They have primarily been operating from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Inflatable boats and engines were often purchased in Germany and the Netherlands and then transported to departure points along the French and Belgian coast. In parallel, organised crime groups have been recruiting irregular migrants for Channel crossings. There were also cases of mass departures involving several boats departing simultaneously. Recorded prices for smuggling in a small boat have been changing in 2020 with facilitators responding to increased demand. In one investigation criminals were charging a smuggling fee of €3 000 per person.



Figure 2: An engine seized during a common action day in September 2020
(Source: French Police)

Other types of vessels used to cross the English Channel

Small boats are not the only type of vessel used by facilitators to smuggle irregular migrants across the Channel to the UK. Registered sailing vessels and motor yachts are also used to transport irregular migrants under the guise of leisure trips, departing from Belgium or the Netherlands³. This modus operandi is less visible than departures with small boats since it involves legitimate, registered vessels.

Outlook

The trend of facilitation of irregular migrants in small boats across the English Channel has continued in January 2021⁴. Successful crossings, attempted crossings or discovery of nautical equipment for crossing have been regularly recorded⁵.

³ Reuters (2020) 'UK arrests 72 people on fishing boat in people-smuggling investigation', 18 November (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-crime-smuggling/uk-arrests-72-people-on-fishing-boat-in-people-smuggling-investigation-idUKKBN27Y2PC>).

⁴ Contribution from an EU Member State.

⁵ Contribution from an EU Member State.