

The Migration Crisis – Europol’s Response

Robert Črepinko
Business Manager
Head of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC)

1. Background

The increased involvement of criminal networks in migrant smuggling together with the number of requests for operational support from EU Member States (MS) and partner countries called for an enhanced and coordinated response from European Law Enforcement Agencies.

The fight against organised illegal smuggling became a top priority for the European Union and is one of the core elements of the European Agenda on Migration.

EUROPOL was tasked to consolidate its capabilities and immediately strengthen existing mechanisms – Joint Operational Team (JOT) MARE, Focal Point (FP) Checkpoint – as well as develop a single entry point for all inter-agency correspondence on organised crime involved in migrant smuggling.

In this context, EUROPOL was invited by the Justice and Home Affairs ministers “to accelerate the establishment of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) to strengthen its capacity to support Member States in better preventing and fighting against migrant smuggling”¹.

The EMSC was officially launched on February 22nd, 2016, during the 2nd EUROPOL and Interpol Forum on Countering Migrant Smuggling Networks.

Coordinating and supporting Member States in conducting pro-active, high-profile operations against migrant smuggling networks is one of the EMSC’s main responsibilities. The EMSC is currently supporting several complex investigations focusing on organised crime groups involved in facilitating illegal immigration both in the Mediterranean Sea (primary movements) as well as in the Western Balkans area and onwards to destination countries in the EU (secondary movements).

EUROPOL’S MOBILE ANALYSIS AND INVESTIGATIONS SUPPORT TEAMS

EUROPOL Mobile Analysis Support Teams (EMAST) are a decentralised section of the EMSC tasked to support the daily work of frontline Member States in the area of information exchange and provide an enhanced, on-the-spot analytical capability. This includes direct cross matching capabilities as well as full analytical support. The focus will be mainly on transit and destination countries.

EUROPOL Mobile Investigation Support Teams (EMIST) will be set up with the aim to support investigations under the national jurisdiction of the host countries. This will include direct cross matching capabilities as well as forensic and limited analytical support. The EMIST will be set up mainly to support EU MS in countries of disembarkation or transit countries.

These teams, while on the ground, will be multi-disciplinary and will work alongside specialists from the host state, other EUROPOL staff and may be supported by experts from other operational partners.

Although the EMIST/EMAST assets are yet to be fully operational, deployments were successfully conducted in support of the Italian authorities with the purpose of case prioritisation, declutter the information flow and identification of new possible investigations, as well as in support of Joint Action Days in Slovakia and Hungary. Further deployments are planned for Austria, in the newly established Joint Operational Office, but also Greece, Poland and Hungary.

¹ JHA Council November 2015

Support provided to the Hellenic Authorities:

Context: Hellenic (GR) authorities are investigating a Bangladeshi criminal group involved in providing forged and look-alike travel and residency documents to migrants.

Modus Operandi: The group was involved in producing high quality forged residency and travel documents and operates from a print-shop located in Athens. The network was also able to supply genuine documents to be used by migrants to travel/reside in the EU. 218 parcels were identified, 46 of these were intercepted by customs and police authorities. The documents were delivered to 29 countries: 16 EU MS and 13 Third countries by post / courier. The information collected was contributed to the EMSC for cross-check and several links were identified. Currently there are several interconnected investigations. Action days were conducted by Hellenic and Czech Republic (CZ) authorities and resulted in a total of 16 arrests and seizure of IT and communication equipment.

Coordination meetings were organized by the EMSC in support of the investigations and tailored analysis products were delivered to competent authorities. EMAST representatives were deployed on the spot and provided real-time cross-matching capabilities to the operational teams.

2. Update on current situation & trends:

a. Central Mediterranean Route:

Since the beginning of 2016, over 56.000 migrants arrived in Italy, mostly following search and rescue call (SAR) Operations conducted by EUNAVFORMED & FRONTEX assets operating in the Mediterranean Sea. The figures recorded so far are slightly higher than those recorded in the same period last year.

The top 5 nationalities detected on the Central Med route are: Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast. The main points of departure for migrants are: Libya and Egypt, but also to a lesser extent – Tunisia, Turkey and Greece.

The facilitators have an active presence on various social media platforms where comprehensive packages of services are offered to prospective migrants.

The smuggling across the Mediterranean Sea was predominately facilitated in unseaworthy rubber boats which are reportedly cheap imports from China, via Turkey and Malta but also shipped overland to Libya from neighbouring Tunisia.

The SAR is used at part of the facilitation of illegal immigration by the smugglers – in most instances the SAR call is launched within the Libyan territorial waters.

b. Eastern Mediterranean & Western Balkan route

More than 160.000 migrants entered Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean Route since the beginning of 2016, mostly facilitated by sea from Turkey to several Greek Islands. A small proportion of migrants were smuggled via land over the green border between Turkey and Greece / Bulgaria.

Since roll-out of the EU – Turkey Agreement the numbers of migrants arriving in Greece decreased from an average of 2000 / week to around 70-100 / week May.

The main nationalities detected on this route are: Syrians, Afghani, Iraqi, Pakistani and Iranian.

The migrants, mostly originating from Syria and Afghanistan are facilitated to several departure points on the Turkish Aegean Coast where they are generally embarked in inflatable boats and transported to the Greek Islands. A recent trend, following the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement, saw the use of speedboats followed by the quick disembarkation of migrants and the return of the smugglers to Turkey.

The significant number of migrants stranded in Greece have caused for a shift in modus operandi used by smugglers for the secondary movements as well. There are daily attempts to smuggle migrants across the green borders to Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and onwards to SERBIA and HUNGARY but also from GREECE to BULGARIA and onwards to HUGARY, mainly via SERBIA.

c. Predicted trends:

- Smuggling using leisure/pleasure crafts from Greece and Turkey to Italy is re – emerging;
- An increasing trend in the numbers of migrants using the Central Mediterranean route is further expected.
- The situation on the Eastern Mediterranean Route is heavily dependent on the continuous engagement and participation of the Turkish authorities.
- Further attempts by smuggling groups to facilitate stranded migrants across the green borders towards the destination countries.

3. Europol's Response:

EUROPOL engaged in several initiatives addressing the security risks posed by migrants travelling unregistered and unchecked through Europe.

EUROPOL officers are currently successfully conducting secondary security checks in the designated hotspots in Greece and Italy.

EUROPOL's presence in the front line already proved fruitful as the results of cross-checks provided crucial information on smuggling networks.

EUROPOL, through the establishment of the European Counterterrorism Centre (ECTC) is now fully equipped to assist EU Member States in conducting investigations in this area by providing intelligence exchange and support as well as tailored analytical products – such as the EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT).

EUROPOL is also developing comprehensive responses to horizontal and opportunistic criminal new phenomena such as the synergies between terrorist organisations, human trafficking criminal groups and human smuggling criminal networks.