

European Migrant Smuggling Centre



Activity Report

FIRST YEAR

Jan 2016 - Jan 2017





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DIMITRIS AVRAMOPOULOS

European Commissioner for Migration,
Home Affairs and Citizenship

"Migrant smuggling is a phenomenon that transcends national borders and can only be eradicated through effective partnerships... We want the European Migrant Smuggling Centre to boost the fight against migrant smuggling networks all across Europe."



ROB WAINWRIGHT

Director of Europol

"Migrant smuggling has become the fastest growing criminal sector - to tackle this we have brought together some of the best investigators in Europe."



WIL VAN GEMERT

Europol Deputy Director Operations

"The establishment of the EMSC was an innovative step forward in tackling organised migrant smuggling. This greatly improved Europol's intelligence processing capabilities and enabled a better understanding of the phenomenon. The EMSC teams laid the solid foundation for Europol's long-term deployments to migration hotspots and not only that but also a sustainable tool intended to bring Europol's products and services even closer to our law enforcement partners. Supporting and coordinating high-profile counter migrant smuggling operations was and remains the EMSC's main objective."



ROBERT CREPINKO

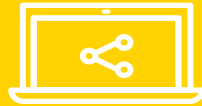
Head of the European Migrant
Smuggling Centre

"The European Migrant Smuggling Centre at Europol now plays a decisive role in supporting Member States to target and dismantle organised crime networks involved in migrant smuggling. Acting as an information hub on the subject, this centre supports the EU Regional Task Forces and complements the work of our partner agencies."

2016 at a glance



17 459 new suspected migrant smugglers identified (+24% v 2015)



1150 suspect social media accounts communicated to the EMSC



11 942 operational messages contributed (+34% vs. 2015)



2589 documents forged, counterfeited or reported lost/stolen



2057 new cases initiated



1800 days of deployment of EMSC staff



522 migrants' debriefings processed



over **500** vessels of interest monitored by Joint Operational Team (JOT) Mare



497 new cases contributed related to identity/document fraud



287 operational analytical products delivered



174 Migrant Smuggling Monitoring Reports delivered



93 high-priority cases received specialist support and coordination



53 operational meetings organised



32 Europol officers and GOs simultaneously deployed to migration hotspots



27 joint and common action days coordinated in 2016



22 print-shops/document forgery factories identified

All this with the support of:



45 dedicated Specialists and Analysts working in the European Migrant Smuggling Centre

Introduction

The increasing involvement of organised criminal networks in facilitating illegal immigration in recent times, together with requests for operational support from EU Member States (MS) and partner countries, called for an enhanced and coordinated response from European law enforcement agencies.

Fighting organised migrant smuggling became a top priority for the European Union and one of the core elements of the European Agenda on Migration. The importance of this field has been recently further strengthened in the Malta Declaration.

In a difficult and rapidly evolving political landscape, with thousands of irregular migrant journeys to Europe being facilitated, Europol was tasked with consolidating its capabilities and immediately strengthening Joint Operational Team (JOT) Mare and Focal Point (FP) Checkpoint, as well as developing a single entry point for all inter-agency communication on organised crime's involvement 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 22 February 2016, during the 2nd Europol-Interpol Forum on Countering Migrant Smuggling Networks.

This report looks at the evolution of migrant smuggling and the development of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre in 2016.

ROUTES AND HOTSPOTS



Routes to the EU



Routes within the EU



Routes from the EU to USA and Canada



Hotspot



EURTF

¹ JHA Council November 2015.



2016 - Trends in Migrants Smuggling

ROUTES



Migration routes evolved dynamically and were influenced by the developing situation in countries of origin, with increasingly restrictive border management measures taken by state authorities in transit and destination countries; this had a direct impact on the way organised crime groups (OCGs) operated.



Throughout 2016, the two main entry corridors - Eastern and Central Mediterranean sea routes - witnessed significant smuggling activities. Migration from North Africa to Europe, in particular, increased in 2016 compared to the previous year².



OCGs focused equally on providing facilitation services for irregular migrants stranded in Europe, along the migration routes.

FACILITATION METHODOLOGY



Unseaworthy vessels, and decommissioned fishing and leisure boats, were the primary migration vessels used to reach Europe.



Lorries and trucks were widely used to cross land borders as part of onward secondary movements; the highly dangerous method of concealing migrants in purpose-built compartments re-emerged.



Facilitation by train and by air was increasingly reported; this displacement is believed to be the consequence of the additional controls implemented on land and sea routes.



An increase in the supply of false documents to irregular migrants was reported; this takes place equally in the countries of origin, migration hotspots and en route.

² http://migration.iom.int/docs/2016_Flows_to_Europe_Overview.pdf

93 HIGH PRIORITY CASES

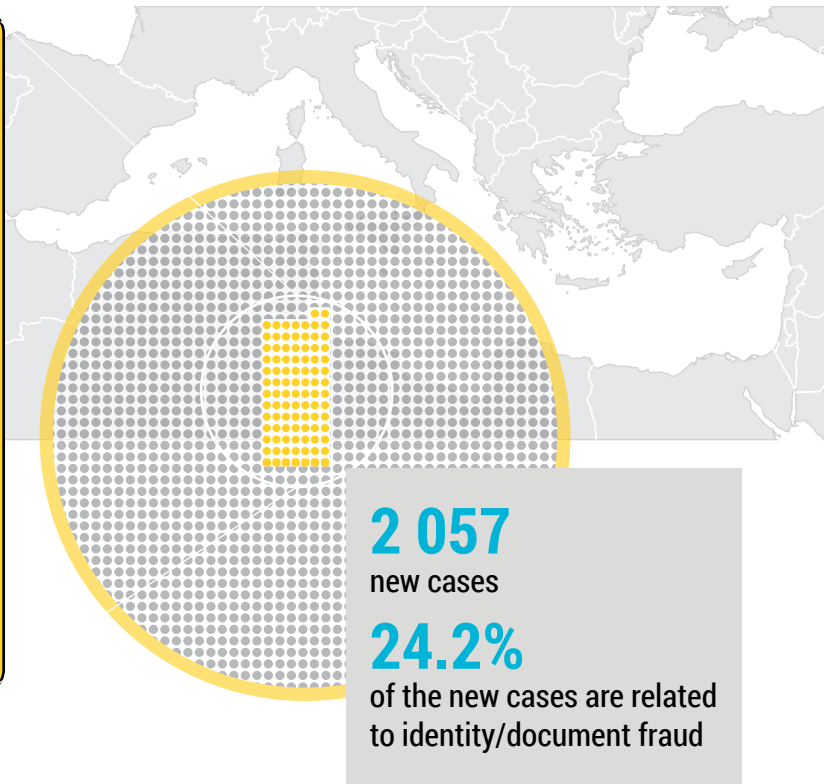
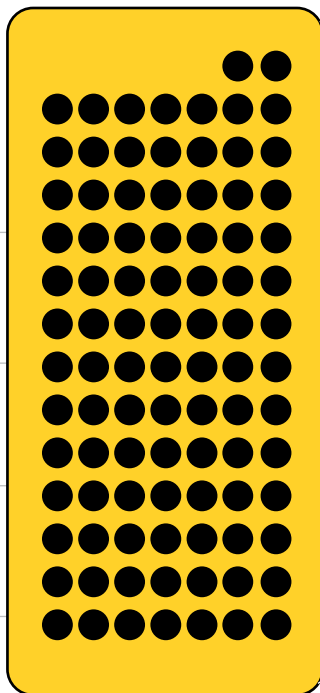
Links to:

document fraud

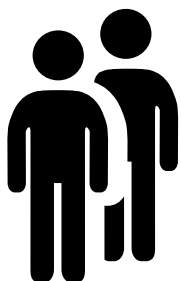
terrorism

trafficking
of human beings

drug trafficking



FACILITATORS/OCGs



The basic structure of the OCGs includes leaders who strategically coordinate activities along the route, organisers who manage activities locally through personal contacts, and opportunistic low-level facilitators.



In countries of origin, facilitators openly advertise their services on social media platforms.



Facilitators operate out of criminal hotspots and large logistical/transportation hubs, both in source countries and along the migration corridors. These are located mainly in large cities but also near border-crossing points and important highways. In a number of cases, crime hotspots were found around reception centres and (informal) camps.

Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) provide facilitation services for irregular migrants, **along the migration routes**. The basic structure of the OCGs includes **leaders** who strategically coordinate activities along the route, **organisers** who manage activities locally through personal contacts, and opportunistic low level **facilitators**.

Facilitators are operating out of criminal hotspots and large **logistical/transportation hubs**, both in source countries and along the migration corridors; these are located mainly in large cities but also near border crossing points and important highways.



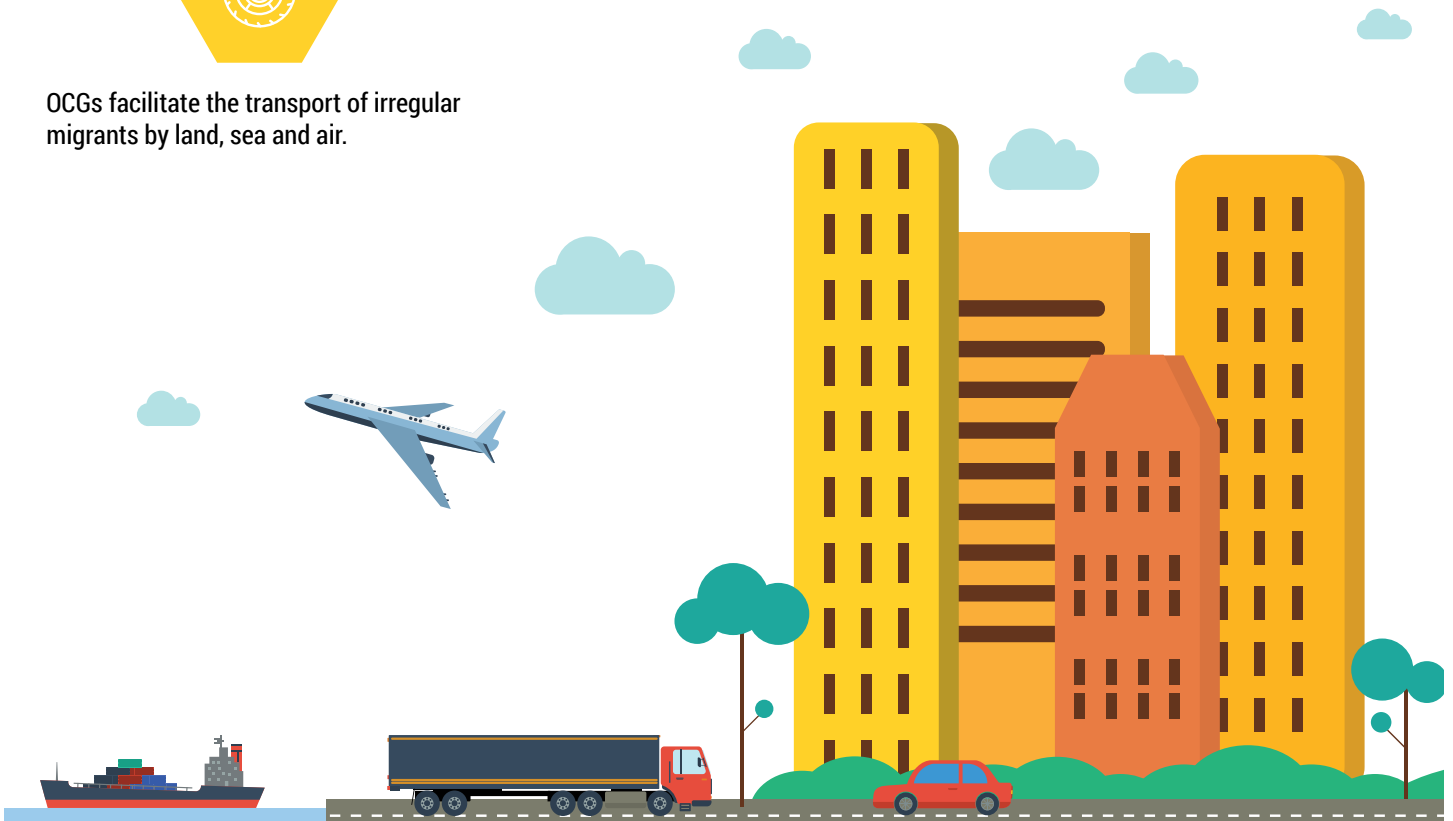
Migrant smuggling networks offer their services including **accommodation**, the **provision of fraudulent documents** and **information** on contact points in other countries.



Migrant smugglers widely rely on **social media** and use online platforms such as **ride-sharing websites**, or Peer to Peer (P2P) accommodation platforms, to arrange facilitation services



OCGs facilitate the transport of irregular migrants by land, sea and air.



European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC)

The EMSC was established following a period of highly dynamic irregular migration, with vulnerable migrants travelling largely unrestricted in sizeable groups across the Mediterranean Sea, external land borders and further on, into Europe towards their desired destination countries.

While the secondary movements were facilitated both by the migrants themselves – self-smuggling – and increasingly by criminal organisations, debriefing interviews with migrants have indicated, and continue to highlight, that at least for the initial sea-journey into Europe, the irregular migrants had to resort to facilitation services, often taking the shape of a risky sea crossing in a completely unsuitable and overcrowded vessel. This business has quickly evolved into a very lucrative form of criminal enterprise, which circumvents and abuses sea border countermeasures deployed in solidarity by EU Member States and Agencies.

Supporting police and border authorities to coordinate highly complex cross-border anti-smuggling operations therefore became the primary objective of the EMSC. This was not achieved in isolation but in many cases in close coordination and synergy with our partner Agencies, dealing with judicial cooperation (Eurojust) and border management (EBCA Frontex).

EMSC specialists and analysts had to rapidly embark on a steep learning curve to ensure the full and timely delivery of quality analytical products as well as digital forensic services to support the law enforcement authorities involved. Dynamic operational activities were mirrored by equally intensive strategy and outreach work, with the team's specialists contributing to a variety of fora and expert meetings, as well as coordinating the EMSC's activities and objectives with the operational actions of the current EU policy cycle.

Throughout 2016 the EMSC received 11 942 messages via Europol's secure communication network - a 34% increase when compared to 2015. The operational messages contained data on over 17 400 migrant smuggling suspects and helped launch over 2000 bi- and multi-lateral cases, including over 490 investigations into identity fraud, an area that received special attention in 2016 and which is expected to further shape the future work of the EMSC.

An innovative system of case management allowed the EMSC to closely monitor and provide tailor-made support, including medium term deployments, to over 90 highly-complex migrant smuggling

investigations conducted by the authorities in the EU and beyond. Several investigations evolved into joint investigation teams (JIT) and many concluded with action days across several jurisdictions. The EMSC supported 27 joint and common action days, with specialists and analysts deployed simultaneously in several locations, to fully address the needs of our law enforcement partners.

The activities of the Joint Operational Team Mare (JOT Mare) continued and expanded in several highly dynamic areas. The 'vessels of interest' (VOI) list was further enhanced and currently includes intelligence on over 500 vessels potentially been used by criminals to smuggle migrants, including large-scale smuggling. JOT Mare support to medium term deployments to EU Regional Task Forces³ headquarters continued, with specialists of the team providing support and coordinating activities with national authorities in both Greece and Italy.

The pilot project of automated exchange of personal data between Frontex and Europol/EMSC – the PEDRA Project - in 2016 facilitated the timely transmission of over 500 debriefing interviews containing criminal data on suspects, facilitators, modi operandi and smuggling routes. This allowed the EMSC to gain valuable insights into the ways criminal groups involved in facilitated illegal immigration operate, and to develop tailored operational and strategic assessments.

Throughout 2016 a visible expansion of migrant smuggling content into the online environment was reported. This was reflected in the significant increase in the number of contributions received by the EMSC, with over 1150 social media accounts reported to the EMSC as openly advertising or being associated with organised migrant smuggling. The smugglers started to aggressively advertise online, targeting vulnerable migrants with attractive and unrealistic offers for 'safe' sea crossings when, in fact, in many cases tragedies unfolded.

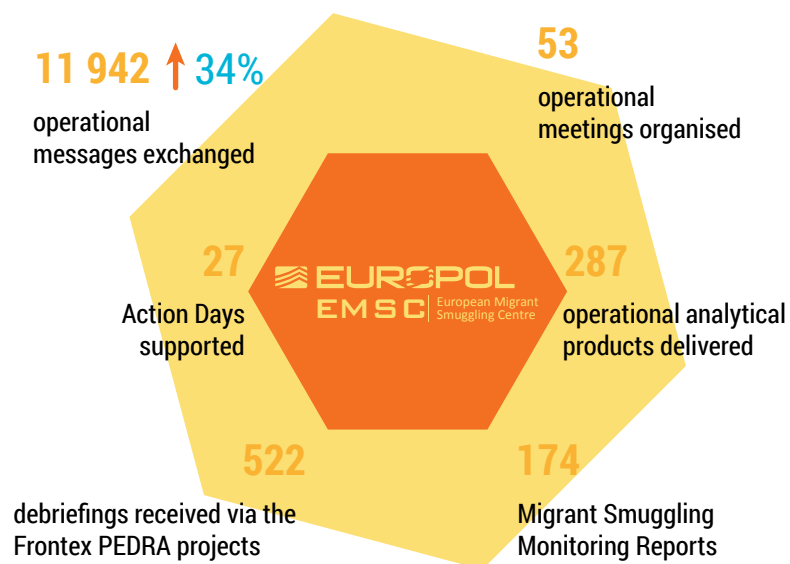
Preventing criminal groups from enjoying the benefits of their illegal activities, and promoting effective asset recovery measures, is not only a priority in the area of facilitated illegal immigration, but for fighting organised criminality in general. The EMSC was therefore involved in a range of related activities in 2016. These included initiatives to disrupt the migrant smuggling business model, map existing knowledge and available expertise, and identify intelligence gaps. An ongoing challenge for law enforcement and prosecution authorities is that a significant portion of the illegal profits are kept well beyond the reach of European police and judicial cooperation instruments, thus making effective investigations and asset recovery a clear challenge and an area for future attention.

³ The EU RTF is a coordinating body assisting the host authorities (Greece and Italy) in the fields of identification, asylum support, intelligence sharing, criminal investigations and the prosecution of criminal networks of people smugglers. It provides a platform for cooperation between EU Agencies

Reaching out to partners well beyond European borders, employing a multidisciplinary approach, was another area of focus by the EMSC. There was active participation in delegations to establish EU Cooperation Platforms on Migrant Smuggling. As part of these initiatives the EMSC travelled and pro-actively engaged with authorities in Senegal, Nigeria and Pakistan, in an attempt to strengthen cooperation with the relevant law enforcement and political actors with responsibility in this area. Links were established with the EUBAM Libya mission as well as EUNAVFORMED. Cooperation with the latter advanced further when a police advisor was seconded to the EMSC, to consolidate cooperation and facilitate timely information exchange.

In 2017, Europol's EMSC activities will continue to focus on pro-actively supporting authorities to coordinate and conduct highly complex anti-smuggling operations. Further consolidating operational partnerships, including by incorporating experts from the US and Australia into the EMSC team, will facilitate further operational interaction and bring added value to the team. Equipped with a new legal framework and in full compliance with the most recent policy decisions, the EMSC will work intensively on developing new partnerships both within and outside Europe, including engaging with the private sector where potentially connected with the migrant smuggling supply chain, and deploying liaison officers closer to the source and transit countries.

Several areas that evolved dynamically during 2016, such as identity (ID) fraud, e-smuggling and financial investigations, will be explored in more depth in this report.



and partners such as Europol, Frontex, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and EUNAVFOR MED, enabling them to intervene rapidly and in a coordinated manner. The EU RTFs were set up as part of the hot spot approach recommended by the European Commission's Agenda on Migration.

Document and identity fraud

Travel and identity documents are an important supporting element of facilitated illegal immigration. Such documents allow unlawful entry and unrestricted movement into and around the EU, and can potentially provide the appearance of having legal residence status. The false documents serve a variety of purposes and are often associated with air travel, facilitated entry into the EU, or supporting false applications for international protection.

The most often reported modi operandi in 2016 were:

- Genuine documents used by imposters (use of an authentic, valid ID/travel document, or the use of a genuine document fraudulently obtained);
- The alteration/modification of a travel/identity document (forgery);
- The production of an entirely false document (counterfeiting).

In response to the increased use of identity/document fraud by migrant smuggling networks, the EMSC is increasingly developing its expertise in this modus operandi, and tailoring Europol's resources – such as the Europol Document Forensic Laboratory (DOCFOR Lab) – to the needs of law enforcement partners, including creating a dedicated ID fraud portfolio within the EMSC.

A senior specialist, a specialist, a dedicated analyst and a document fraud expert are responsible for further developing EMSC's capacities in this field and supporting investigations focusing on illegal immigration cases with a strong identity/document fraud component.

Throughout 2016, 497 new contributions related to identity and document fraud were received by the EMSC, including information on 2589 identity or travel documents forged, counterfeited or reported as lost/stolen. These documents mostly originated from Belgium, France, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia.

The EMSC supported 26 highly-complex investigations focusing on identity/document fraud and document forgery factories. The suspects in these investigations, and beneficiaries of forged documents, originated from Iran, Iraq, Syria, India and Bangladesh.



17 459 ↑ 24%
new suspects



1 150 ↑ 770%
social media accounts connected to migrant smuggling identified



2 589
forged identity or travel documents reported



500 ↑ 400%
vessels of interest are monitored



22
printshops/document forgery factories located



1 800
days EMSC Specialists and Analysts have been deployed



32
Europol officers and guest officers deployed to Greek and Italian Hotspots

In several cases, the passports and other ID/travel documents (look-alikes, forged or counterfeit) were delivered to customers across Europe via fast parcel companies (e.g. DHL), before being handed over to irregular migrants.

EMSC received information on 22 print shops/document forgery factories located in and outside the EU, and thus actively supported several investigations concluding with the dismantling of these facilities and the arrest of the document suppliers⁴.

This topic is not only treated as a priority by Europol and the EMSC, it is also an operational action of the 2017 EU Operational Action Plan (OAP) on Facilitated Illegal Immigration. As part of the current policy cycle, the main objective is to facilitate and support partner authorities in developing coordinated large-scale joint action days at airports, ports, train stations and border crossing points of 15 European countries. In 2017, the EMSC will continue to focus and further develop its products and services to fully address the challenges associated with identity fraud.

⁴<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/dozens-arrested-for-massive-document-forgery-and-migrant-smuggling>

E-smuggling – the migrant smuggling content in social media

Facilitated illegal migration and associated content became not only increasingly visible in the online environment, but also significantly increased in quantity and complexity. Various social media platforms are increasingly used and abused by criminal groups almost without impunity, to openly advertise smuggling services. These developments triggered the establishment of a specialist thematic area within the JOT Mare team.

In 2016, 1150 suspect social media accounts were communicated to the EMSC – JOT Mare. This reflects a 87% increase when compared to approximately 148 such accounts in 2015. The social media platform of choice for smugglers remains Facebook; however a very slight movement towards other service providers, such as Telegram, was detected.

The majority of smuggling services advertised come under several key categories, with transportation into Europe and false documentation topping the list. Nevertheless, the variety of these services has greatly expanded and nowadays includes offers that suggest criminal groups are also attempting to corrupt embassy and consular officials from European embassies located mostly outside the EU.

Transportation offers became more comprehensive and complex in 2016; offers from source countries further upstream increased, with all kinds of different transport methods being offered such as trips on cruise ships, cargo ships, and an increase in the use of air travel. Furthermore, increasingly sophisticated and specialist illegal services have been offered, such as arranging sham marriages, and comprehensive package deals claiming even to be able to address issues such as study or work permits.

Most smugglers advertising online continue to appear to be based outside the EU, the majority in Turkey, but in 2016 we also witnessed a number of examples of accounts which are apparently based in Europe and offer high quality false European documentation and smuggling via land into the EU but equally use the EU as a transit point to facilitate irregular migration to other continents, in particular North America.

Supported by the EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU)⁵, the EMSC



cruise ships



cargo ships



air travel



arranged sham marriages



study and work permits

produced and disseminated 16 Intelligence Notifications to Member States in relation to social media being used to facilitate illegal immigration, the majority of which offered operational opportunities. As a result, investigative steps were taken in many countries. One example of the effectiveness of monitoring migrant smuggling social media content was the successful profiling of a Turkish OCG smuggling irregular migrants into Europe on cargo ships. The timely dissemination of the intelligence package led to the detection of 12 migrants on a cargo ship arriving into Slovenia. The Turkish smugglers suspected to have organised the group were arrested.

During 2016 EMSC has enhanced relationships with, and provided expertise to, several Member States who aspire to building national capacities for monitoring social media being used to facilitate illegal immigration. Stronger relationships with other agencies involved in the area, such as UNHCR and EASO, have also been developed. Links have been made with non-EU countries in relation to social media via Interpol and the Frontex-African Intelligence Community.

In 2017, given the dynamics of migration, the EMSC anticipates that social media will further consolidate its position as a readily available information platform for facilitation services. The EMSC will continue to focus and further enhance its analytical capabilities and will interconnect already-existing Europol resources, including effectively reaching out to service providers to cover the increasingly diverse migrant smuggling information openly available online.

⁵ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-internet-referral-unit-one-year>

Financial investigations and recovery of criminal assets

One of the priorities of the EMSC in 2016 was tackling the migrant smuggling business model through pro-active financial investigations and effective asset recovery operations. To map the knowledge and available expertise in this field, the EMSC organised a series of events attended by both migrant smuggling specialists

and financial investigators. The aim was to identify the gaps and legal possibilities to increase the number of financial investigations connected to migrant smuggling, but also address the issue in a multidisciplinary environment in partnership with industry and the private sector.

4 key areas were singled-out in the conclusions of the event and these became priorities for the EMSC:



CASH

Cash is still king. Migrants continue to pay in cash at several stages during their journey; this is the so-called pay-as-you-go method. Reports indicate that smugglers increasingly used violence and requested the amounts to be paid upfront and held migrants captive in guarded safe houses. EMSC supported several investigations which facilitated the release of the migrants from illegal safe houses as well as the arrest of smugglers.



LEGAL MONEY TRANSFER BUSINESSES

EMSC established extensive co-operation both with US Immigration and Custom Enforcement (US ICE) and Western Union Global Investigation Network in order to access crucial money transfer data. The money transfer agencies in source, transit and destination countries continue to be used by facilitators because of their worldwide accessibility and effectiveness.



SUSPICIOUS BANKING

Although the use of bank accounts to shift and conceal criminal profits became increasingly difficult, a number of prospective projects initiated by Member States Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs), were welcomed and received the support of Europol. The aim of these projects is to analyse any suspicious transactions reported by the financial sector in attempt to identify members of criminal groups. Several risk indicators were established to facilitate the identification of suspicious transactions.



UNDERGROUND BANKING

At least the 20% of the money flows between smugglers and migrants occurs underground using the so called 'Hawaladars'. This method is also widely used by smugglers because the real flow is, if not impossible, extremely difficult to detect. The EMSC is pro-actively supporting a new initiative to tackle this at EU level; an expert meeting was already organized to facilitate the drafting of a project proposal; the application was successful and received EMPACT funding for the implementation.

In 2015, migrant smuggling networks offering facilitation services to reach or move within the EU generated an estimated EUR 4.7 billion to EUR 5.7 billion in profit.

These profits have seen a sharp decline in 2016, dropping by nearly EUR 2 billion between 2015 and 2016. This development is in line with the overall decrease in the number of irregular migrants arriving in the EU.

Way forward

The facilitated illegal immigration remains a global phenomenon, affecting not only Europe. This challenge cannot be dealt with in isolation; effective action against organised migrant smuggling requires a multidisciplinary approach, the law enforcement cooperation being just one of the several areas in need of further coordination and strengthening.

In the light of the most recent policy decisions and taking full advantage of the new legal framework that will come into effect in May 2017⁷, the EMSC aims at reaching out further beyond European borders to source and transit countries with a view to develop effective regional partnerships focused on enhancing the strategic picture on organised migrant smuggling and facilitate the deployment of effective judicial counter-measures.

Cooperation with the European Commission to further develop the EU cooperation platforms on migrant smuggling will continue, as well as further identifying synergies and effectively working together with other EU Agencies. Advancing the already excellent cooperation with Interpol by actively supporting and contributing to Interpol's Specialised Operational Network (ISON), and strengthening links with the EUROMED countries, will also feature prominently in 2017.

The EMSC will play a leading role in coordinating migrant smuggling operations in line with the objectives of the policy cycle not only on the ground alongside our law enforcement partners but also in the virtual world by dedicating additional resources to cover the constantly expanding migrant smuggling content on-line.

Preventing facilitators from fully enjoying the profits of their criminal enterprises will continue in 2017 with more resources and better tools expected to become available to our law enforcement partners. Similarly for ID Fraud, the EMSC will continue to concentrate on this and map all available expertise in support of criminal investigations focusing on this specific type of crime.

In 2017 the EMSC will continue to enhance the level of specialist support to law enforcement partners to fully match the business needs of our extensive list of beneficiaries as well as the challenging operational environment.

The development of targeted cross-border criminal investigations aimed at disrupting migrant smuggling networks will be the EMSC top priority.



⁷ Regulation (EU) 2016/794 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and replacing and repealing Council Decisions 2009/371/JHA, 2009/934/JHA, 2009/935/JHA, 2009/936/JHA and 2009/968/JHA.





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