

# INTERPOL's Contribution and Prospective Roles in Tackling Migrant Smuggling Concerning Europe and Wider Area



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## Abstract

Illegal migration is a major ongoing crisis affecting Europe, but, also, a global one. While the causes determining people to leave their habitat are diverse (violent conflicts, social unrest, economic problems, effects of the climate change and so on), what is obvious is that the migrant smugglers ruthlessly try to take advantage on their plight for profit purposes. In this regard, INTERPOL's assistance to the national authorities, as well as its cooperation with other international organisations and agencies operating in the field of law enforcement cooperation, in countering migrant smuggling, is hugely important. As migrant trafficking is one of the driving forces of illegal migration, in the author's opinion, in order to better counter the complex migrant smuggling networks, it would be needed a more comprehensive, targeted and tailored approach meant to facilitate simultaneous, quicker and coordinated operations in multiple jurisdictions.

**Aim:** To describe the contribution of trafficking in migrants to the exacerbation of illegal migration, the role of INTERPOL in assisting European Union and its relevant agencies, as well as to contemplate to new ideas leading to solutions meant to tackle more effectively this scourge.

**Methodology:** Having a solid experience in combating migrant smuggling, both at the operational and strategic level, as well as in the field of international Police cooperation, the Author, using both an empirical and a descriptive approach, tries to highlight the main elements of the problem based on which to contribute to a debate aimed at finding ideas and solutions for improving the efficiency of the fight against this criminal phenomenon, concerning the European continent and a wider area.

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**Findings:** The migrant smuggling networks are intrinsically connected to the phenomenon of illegal migration, looking to exploit its causes and take advantage on people's vulnerabilities. These networks, which could be very dynamic and complex, easily spreads and infiltrates across national jurisdictions, requiring a strong response on behalf of the law enforcement agencies, which cannot be effective enough without ensuring a solid, smart and flexible international cooperation process, both at strategic and practical level. In this respect, INTERPOL's role, alongside its partners at European and global level is essential. **Value:** The author's purpose is that of describing the complexity and the implications of migrant smuggling on Europe, as well as to propose a more pragmatic, tailored and coordinated approach for fighting this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** illegal migration, migrant smuggling, criminal networks, international cooperation

## **INTERPOL – From Inception to Creation and Achieving an Utmost Importance**

The initiative of Prince Albert I of Monaco in 1914, subsequently revived in 1923 by Dr Johannes Schober, then the President of Vienna Police, laid the foundations of INTERPOL,<sup>1</sup> which became one of the most important and respected international organisations, recognised formally as such by United Nations in 1972 ([URL1](#)).

Based on its Constitution adopted in 1956, and subsequently amended so as to keep the pace with the changing realities, INTERPOL does not represent just a formidable organisation for Police cooperation, but, also, contributes to shaping a common Police culture across the world, contributing essentially to the global security, by excluding political interferences and, ultimately, pursuing the protection and safety of individuals, their integrity, property and dignity.

Without INTERPOL, it is hard to imagine how prevention and fighting transnational and organised crime would be possible. Through a comprehensive and resilient approach, involving not only Police entities of its Member States, but, also, intergovernmental and non-governmental international organisations,<sup>2</sup> INTERPOL shows that impunity cannot be achieved by fleeing to other countries or even continents and the law enforcement's response does not stop at the border.

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1 International Criminal Police Organization – INTERPOL.

2 Art. 41 (Constitution of ICPO-INTERPOL).

An indispensable feature of any modern Police force is its adaptability and capacity to permanently find efficient solutions for tackling the continuously evolving criminal phenomena, especially the most serious ones affecting multiple jurisdictions, as for example: drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings, migrant smuggling, firearm trafficking, cybercrime, terrorism (URL2) etc. In this regard, INTERPOL brings an important contribution, by ensuring a fast and efficient communication, building trust and promoting cooperation among Police forces, developing tailored instruments and techniques which are made available to its members and partners, as for example: capacity building, coordination capabilities, intelligence analysis, access to databases, border management, change management tools.

As member of INTERPOL, a Police force *'will never walk alone'*.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Trap of Migrant Smuggling: Profiteering of Vulnerable Ones**

I chose migrant smuggling as the main subject of my article from a number of reasons related to my professional experience and the tremendous effects of this phenomenon to Europe and wider region.

2015 – more than 1 million people crossed into Europe igniting a humanitarian and a long-term political crisis which still divides European Union and Europe in its entirety (URL3). On that occasion some new reference terms emerged, which taken out of context could be imagined as elements of a touristic guide: Western Balkan route, Mediterranean routes etc., which instead symbolise misery, vain hopes, disagreement, political clashes and so on.

The first major political crisis of this kind proved to be a shock for European Union with divisive effects that are still felt today, which moreover seems to exacerbate and get new sordid facets, as for example political tools sometimes meant both for external and internal purposes.

From my perspective, migrant smuggling is one of the main driving forces of illegal migration, a versatile phenomenon, capable to blur the lines between the root causes of displacements and to take rapidly advantage of any opportunity which could increase its efficiency as a whole, but, also, related to its integral elements: advertisement and recruitment, transportation, evading border controls and protection, circulating money, ensuring smugglers' anonymity etc. Through its amplitude and complexity, migrant smuggling is likely to dramatically affect

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3 *'You'll never walk alone'* – Anthem of Liverpool Football Club (a song by Gerry & The Pacemakers).

the effectiveness of ‘classical’ measures to combat illegal migration, including border security, ‘fences’ or asylum policies, no matter how good they may be.

By using sophisticated methods, often employing technological instruments, the smugglers pursue to transport migrants from an origin country to a destination state for financial gains and will continue and develop their activities as long as their networks remain functional. The smugglers have no legal or moral standards or restrictions, as their only goal is simply lucrative. In this respect, they will use any opportunity which may arise and take advantage of any vulnerability of law enforcement authorities. As for example, the criminals can instantly communicate and cooperate among themselves using the newest technological means which often offer them even the possibility to go undetected (for example, online games platforms) and move money ‘under the radar’ (for example, using Hawala system) (URL4). At the same time, the law enforcement authorities, including their international cooperation, are tied to regulations, law and agreements etc. which limit the flexibility and real time reaction of their actions and put them in a disadvantageous situation comparing to criminals.

Once the migrants arrive at their supposed destination or are detected in a transitory state, the smugglers’ ‘job’ is done, and the burden of the smuggled persons is taken over by the authorities of the states in question. At this point, we are in the position to contemplate at what it could have been done for preventing this situation and, more important, to learn lessons for improving our reactive and proactive capabilities for tackling and disrupting this phenomenon.

Taking a view on Europe, especially on European Union and Schengen area, in my opinion, preventing illegal entries by means of border security, removing illegal migrants from the EU territory and so on cannot be reasonably effective without an integrated, tailored and comprehensive approach at international level to the phenomenon of migrant smuggling, simply because, with the contribution of migrant smugglers, many of those individuals who fail to enter the EU or, who are returned, will try again, and, in addition, they will be joined by others, permanently increasing the pressure.

Illegal migration, a phenomenon which, since 2010, has been exacerbated by events and movements in the Middle East and, more recently in Ukraine, is one of the greatest challenges which EU is facing, its complexity and, above all, the difficulty of identifying and implementing effective solutions causing considerable dissension within the Community bloc. And, as I have already said, migrant smuggling proves to be an intrinsic element of illegal migration and at its core stays the complex smuggling networks which spread from the origin up to the destination countries.

A conclusive image of the functioning of migrant smuggling networks and, at the same time, a school-case with many lessons-learned to draw from it, is the migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border from 2021–2022, when the role of recruiters (including travel agencies or other entities) was very clear in influencing people’s decisions to sell their life savings and go into debt in order to migrate to Europe. Many of the migrants, misled by recruiters, arrived in Belarus from Iraqi Kurdistan with the aim of forcing their way into the European Union in search of a better life.

According to a survey conducted by International Organization for Migration among the Iraqi returnees who returned from Belarus and neighbouring countries during the Belarusian migration crisis in 2021–22 (URL5), *‘over a half of the respondents (they stated) received some form of help to migrate (64%). Of these, most received assistance from family or friends (58%), with 41% also reporting using a people smuggler and 38% reporting travel being facilitated by a travel agent.’*

*‘Of those that received assistance from smugglers and travel agents, most found information about their services through word of mouth (68%), (...) a third using social media to gather information (29%). In community discussions, word of mouth and social media were identified by participants as the two primary sources of information on irregular migration routes, smugglers and travel agents. (...) Smugglers are also reportedly using social media platforms to share information on irregular migration routes to Europe and promote their services. Social media platforms specified (...) as sources of information included TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Viber. Around 70% of survey respondents borrowed money to fund their attempted migration, although they did so almost exclusively from family and friends (93% of all those that borrowed money). Half of respondents drew upon savings to pay for the journey (53%) and/or sold assets such as their house, land, cars or furniture.’*

As deceived by recruiters and the stories sold by them, many people could fall in a trap which may ruin their lives, instead of leading them towards a promise land. Many chose to spend all they have or all their families have to finance their trip to Europe. As long as they got money, the smuggling networks would help them, then they are on their own.

In 2014, before the migration crisis which ignited the following year, during my tenure as Home Affairs Attaché in Dublin, I attended a conference (held under the Chatham House rule) where an EU official at the time was asked about the causes of illegal migration, especially from areas not directly or immediately affected by a violent conflict. He answered under the form of an impromptu example which made a part of the audience leave the room ‘in

dismay': *In a village in Africa someone gets a TV, an antenna and a generator and, among other things, the community members can see 'the wonder of life' in Europe. Then an individual comes along and tells them he could help them, in exchange of money, of course, to reach the old continent, where they would have a better life and would be able to send money to those back home. The family sells their livestock and chooses one of them to go on a journey that can change their lives.* At that time, I didn't think much of the subject, but later I better understood its essence.

As well, during a private trip I paid to Sarajevo in 2019, I was surprised when the owner of a restaurant told me that during the previous winter he had managed to survive thanks to the migrants in transit who used to visit his restaurant.

Migrant smuggling is a very lucrative, extremely well-organised business, and the efforts of the national authorities from the origin, transit and destination countries manage, even with the instruments offered by bilateral and multilateral international agreements, to break up only partially the migrant smuggling networks, while the organisers and ringleaders very often remains undetected and go unpunished.

In my opinion, in this nebula, the main victims of illegal migration are those who are most in need of protection and support from the international community, namely the refugees, who are directly and immediately affected by conflicts, conflagrations and repression, the majority of whom not having the material and financial means, the strength and the state of health to face the long journey towards the 'European dream'. Consequently, many of them even lose their lives in places such as the Mediterranean Sea. Lost in the complexity of illegal migration, the refugees are harder to identify and support.

As well, many of those (who, from certain points of view, could be classified as 'economic migrants') who are 'convinced' by false methods, means and information to embark on an uncertain journey to the 'European paradise' by paying important sums of money, do never reach their destination or are returned. Consequently, their lifetime savings or the money borrowed by them or by their families are lost, in many cases placing them in a state of dependence and servitude, which shows how close is migrant smuggling to trafficking in human beings.

As well as in case of other serious crimes, INTERPOL has brought an important contribution by assisting the law enforcement agencies around the world in fighting migrant smuggling by various means meant to increase their capacities *'to detect and investigate these crimes while protecting victims and vulnerable people'*, as for example by: facilitating Police cooperation and exchange of information; producing operational and static analysis reports to support law enforcement decision making; supporting transnational operations carried

out by its member countries; assisting the law enforcement authorities in developing their capacity; coordination of law enforcement specialised networks (for example, INTERPOL's Specialized Operational Network against Migrant Smuggling) (URL6).

INTERPOL's global operations in the field of combating migrant smuggling leads to identifying hundreds of criminals every year, by applying theoretical and practical tools, including training workshops, making use of its databases and expertise and cooperating with other various actors (URL7) including EU agencies (Europol, Eurojust, Frontex, CEPOL, eu-LISA) and EU institutions (European Parliament, European Council, European Commission, European External Action Service) (URL8).

INTERPOL is a key partner for European Union and its relevant agencies in the home affairs area, in fighting transnational crime and terrorism, based on a solid partnership meant to ensure that 'each party benefits fully from what the other can offer'. An important element of this cooperation is the Office of the Special Representatives of INTERPOL in Brussels, meant to facilitate a convergence between EU and global law enforcement initiatives and actions (URL9).

A major area of cooperation is fighting irregular migration and smuggling of migrants, by using various available legal and practical tools and putting forward initiatives meant to develop their capacities, including joint projects.

*'Considering the complementarity of the tasks, objectives and responsibilities'* INTERPOL and Europol concluded a strategic agreement in 2001 with the aim to *'establish and maintain cooperation (...) in combating serious forms of organised international crime'* (URL10; URL11).<sup>4</sup> INTERPOL is contributing to the EU's Migrant Smuggling Centre (URL12), established by Europol in 2016. As well as this, INTERPOL established in 2018 'The Information Clearing House' to *'combat smuggling networks and enhance international partnerships between INTERPOL and EU agencies like Europol, Frontex and the European Union Asylum Agency'* (URL13).

At wider regional level, INTERPOL is working with EU in relation to supporting G5 Sahel Joint Force in effectively countering criminality, including people smuggling.

Another reflection of their commitment to enhance their cooperation is the interest of INTERPOL and its EU partners to explore options for developing an electronic system for transmitting Mutual Legal Assistance exchanges, which would considerably speed up the global communication process in this field.

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4 Agreement between INTERPOL and Europol, signed on 5 November 2001.

As part of their solid partnership, EU contributes to funding some of INTERPOL's projects: Project IDEA, Project Shakara or The West African Police Information System etc. (URL14).

Strictly related to migrant smuggling and human trafficking, the European Union, its institutions and its members states have a major and direct interest in supporting and funding INTERPOL initiatives and projects concerning this area, as for example (URL15): '*Countering human trafficking and smuggling of migrants in the European Union*' (timeframe 2022–2023, funded by European Commission, budget 158,000 EUR), '*Countering human trafficking in the Balkans*' (time frame 2021–2023, funded by German Federal Foreign Office, budget 1,140,000 EUR), '*Fighting human trafficking and migrant smuggling in the Horn of Africa*' (timeframe 2022–2024, funded by European Union, budget 642,000 EUR).

## Looking for Ideas, Solutions, Opportunities...

I would like to stress the fact that my intention is not to provide an idea and endorse it as a panacea to the problem of migrant smuggling regarding Europe, but rather to ignite a larger debate in this direction which, ultimately, to lead to an indeed effective solution. Therefore, it is less important how wrong and flawed my opinions might be, since attracting criticism on them is, in fact, a part of the plan.

At European level, the ongoing dilemma on the most appropriate and effective ways of managing and alleviating illegal migration has created dissensions among EU Member States, with some being more in favour of stopping the flow, including by building border fences, and others considering solidarity in accepting migrants etc. as the main way forward.

It is not easy to identify a single 'magic' solution, but, personally, I am convinced that illegal migration could be limited by tackling the migrant smuggling through a dedicated, tailored and comprehensive approach, at regional and even global level, with INTERPOL holding an important role.

In this regard, from my perspective, with the aim to tackle and prevent migrant smuggling in a unified and coordinated manner, such a solution could be achieved under the form of a permanent taskforce or international cooperation centre.

Such a Centre would comprise liaison officers, with sound expertise in fighting trafficking in migrants (police officers and prosecutors) and, if needed representatives of other relevant institutions from the concerned countries (destination, transit and origin), as well as from relevant EU institutions and agencies, INTERPOL and other international law enforcement fora.



Since the most interested parties are European Union and its Member States, the Centre would be primarily financed by and work under the aegis of EU based on a multilateral status and/or working agreements concluded with the participating parties, with a fix-term renewable mandate.<sup>5</sup>

From my point of view, for practical reasons, a feasible solution would be for the Centre to be headquartered in an EU state located in the proximity of the main migratory routes and/or at the Union's external border.<sup>6</sup> At first, in order to assess its feasibility, a task-force could be set up as a pilot project for a limited period of time, comprising several countries which are on or in the vicinity of Western Balkan route.

The main scope of the Centre would be focused on information exchange, police/judicial cooperation and operational coordination.

Regarding the information exchange, Europol and INTERPOL would play a central and strategic role, by making use of their tools and mechanism, including their information analysis capabilities, which could be essential for example regarding the decision-making process. Of course, in punctual cases, the intelligence could be exchanged, as well, through liaison officers.

The Centre could, also, assist EU and the law enforcement authorities from the concerned states to carry out an 'inventory' of the phenomenon, to agree on a comprehensive 'battle plan' and prioritise their actions in accordance to their common interest and the changing realities.

In respect of facilitation and coordination of joint operations and investigative activities within the jurisdictions of the states which would adhere to the Centre, I believe this would be the essence of the Centre and the area where it could contribute the most to the efforts of fighting against migrant smuggling networks.

It would be of a tremendous importance in succeeding to dismantle as many as possible networks of trafficking in migrants, by achieving the possibility to initiate, deploy and carry out joint complex operations in different jurisdictions simultaneously or in a very short period of time, in a speedy, coordinated and integrated manner.

As a practical example, we could imagine the ideal situation when by merely starting from a transporter or a guide,<sup>7</sup> the law enforcement authorities could easily investigate and follow the thread and successfully dismantle a network which spreads his tentacles from Middle East to Western Union, including by reaching to the main kingpins and organisers.

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5 A possible name suggested by the author could be: 'Centre for International Cooperation against Trafficking in Migrants' (possible acronym CENTRAMIG), hereinafter referred to as the Centre.

6 For example, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Austria etc.

7 For example, apprehended in Hungary, Austria or Germany.

By using its expertise, tools, mechanism and networks described above, INTERPOL would have a very important role in the functioning of such a Centre, including by providing assistance in liaising and cooperation at global and regional level.

One of the most valuable lessons I got from my professional activity is the importance of personal contacts and direct cooperation, including at operational level, in the world of international law enforcement cooperation, whose relevance could be particularly obvious in those cases affecting multiple jurisdictions, in this respect migrants smuggling being a perfect example.

Thus, by building trust and making possible a convergence between different national criminal procedural legislations and procedures, the main aim of direct cooperation is to ensure a timely and effective response and action, so as to keep the pace with the developments and progress of criminal activities, which have few restrictions except of those imposed by law enforcement.

In addition to the operational scope of the Centre, the data, information and the facts collected during the operational activities in different jurisdictions could be capitalised for developing an efficient mechanism of prevention and awareness raising regarding the traps of migrant smuggling, focused mainly on the origin and transit countries and the recruitment phase, which is the first segment of the criminal chain. Once the recruitment stage is 'burnt', the migration process is very difficult to stop or divert, often with no way back for those who have invested everything they have to pay the traffickers. These activities could be realised, for example by advising, mentoring and providing financial support to the relevant authorities from the concerned countries in order to strengthen their legal and practical framework so as to achieve better capacities for prevention through awareness campaigns, taking advantage of all available opportunities: outreach in the field, online activities, etc.

The data and aspects resulting from the work of the Centre, could be used, as well, to assist EU and other international organisations and actors in focusing their efforts to support and facilitate the reconstruction, social and economic development of origin countries or attenuating the effects of climate changes, which would have beneficial effects for both countries of origin, transit and destination.

## Online links in the article

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- URL1: *Key dates*. <https://www.interpol.int/Who-we-are/INTERPOL-100/Key-dates>
- URL2: *What is INTERPOL*. <https://www.interpol.int/Who-we-are/What-is-INTERPOL>
- URL3: *Europe's migrant crisis: The year that changed a continent*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53925209>
- URL4: *Hawala. How does this informal funds transfer system work, and should it be regulated?* <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2002/12/elqorchi.htm>
- URL5: *A survey of returnees from the Belarusian Migration Crisis conducted by IOM, released on April 2022*. [https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/BorderMonitoring/2023155636945\\_DTM\\_Returnees\\_From\\_Belarusian\\_Migration\\_Crisis\\_April\\_2022.pdf](https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/BorderMonitoring/2023155636945_DTM_Returnees_From_Belarusian_Migration_Crisis_April_2022.pdf)
- URL6: *Human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Our response*. <https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling/Our-response>
- URL7: *Human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Operations*. <https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling/Operations>
- URL8: *Cooperation with EU Institutions and agencies*. <https://www.interpol.int/Our-partners/International-organization-partners/INTERPOL-and-the-European-Union>
- URL9: *The Office of the Special Representative of INTERPOL to the European Union*. <https://www.interpol.int/Our-partners/International-organization-partners/INTERPOL-and-the-European-Union>
- URL10: *Agreement between Interpol and Europol, signed on 05 November 2001*. [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/agreement\\_between\\_Interpol\\_and\\_Europol.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/agreement_between_Interpol_and_Europol.pdf)
- URL11: *Partners-collaboration: INTERPOL*. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/partners-collaboration/agreements/interpol>
- URL12: *European Migrant Smuggling Centre*. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/european-serious-and-organised-crime-centre-esocc/european-migrant-smuggling-centre-emsc>
- URL13: *The Information Clearing House*. <https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling/Project-HTSM-European-Union>
- URL14: *INTERPOL and the European Union. EU funded projects*. <https://www.interpol.int/Our-partners/International-organization-partners/INTERPOL-and-the-European-Union>
- URL15: *Human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Projects (funded by EU and EU members states)*. <https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Human-trafficking-and-migrant-smuggling>

## Reference of the article according to APA regulation

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