



MIGRATION AND CRIME IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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INTRODUCTION

We must be tough and united in our response to the crime of smuggling. We must all put in place the right legislation. We must get our law enforcement agencies and prosecution services to work together. We must seize the assets used by criminals. We must shut down the international supply chains and financial flows of criminal groups. And we can only do this together. We all have something to learn and something to share.

Ursula von der Leyen at the International Conference on a Global Alliance to Counter Smuggling (EC, 2023)

The 2024 European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) reports that organized crime remains a serious threat to the internal security of the EU. It impacts individuals' well-being and incurs substantial political and social costs, along with enormous economic losses that adversely affect the welfare of EU citizens. In 2019, the estimated annual income from nine major criminal markets in the EU ranged between €92 billion and €188 billion, accounting for approximately 0.7% to 1.4% of the GDP of the EU-27. Alarming, less than 2% of the estimated annual proceeds from these criminal activities are recovered. The overall economic impact of organized crime is considerably greater, as these revenues are often reinvested into further illegal endeavors or integrated into the legitimate

economy, thereby promoting corruption and undermining both personal and public safety (EC, 2021).

In 2023, the financial toll of organized crime on the EU is estimated at €19.2 billion, with 59% attributed to serious cross-border VAT fraud. Cybercrime, which has surged in recent years due to the relentless growth of digitalization and new technologies, is projected to cost the global economy approximately USD 10.5 trillion by 2025 (WEF, 2023).

According to Europol, document fraud, money laundering, corruption, and the online trade of illicit goods and services are key facilitators of organized crime in the EU. Criminal networks often go to great lengths to maintain an appearance of legality, with 86% of the most dangerous networks operating under legal business structures. The staggering fact that 98% of estimated criminal proceeds remain unconfiscated implies a vast scale of money laundering aimed at hiding the origins of these revenues (Europol, 2021).

Organized criminal groups (OCGs) exploit enforcement gaps and thrive in an era of globalization, capitalizing on open borders and free trade. These syndicates are responsive to supply-and-demand dynamics and are highly adaptable to changing circumstances. Their strategies enable some of the most formidable criminal networks to endure for long periods, with 34% having operated for over 10 years.

Europol anticipates that criminals will continue to adapt and take advantage of emerging opportunities arising from economic volatility to maximize their profits. This could lead to increased corruption and money laundering, as well as a resurgence of mafia-type OCGs in regions characterized by weak governance and economic distress.

Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, suggests that in addition to exploiting economic crises, OCGs may also capitalize on geopolitical tensions by targeting specific attractive border regions or sectors. For instance, Russia's war against Ukraine poses risks such as potential increases in human trafficking, arms trafficking, and cyber-attacks (Luyten, 2024).

Criminal networks are a genuine threat to EU internal security with increasingly more organized crime groups operating throughout the EU territory, which often have cross-border connections. Ever since the early 1990s, the EU has made some progress in safeguarding its citizens, often responding to high-profile incidents such as mafia or other organized crime syndicate killings, massive money-laundering scandals, and concerning trends such as the abrupt rise in migrant smuggling and human trafficking following the 2015 migration crisis, and the sudden spike in cybercrime, fraud, and counterfeiting during the Coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, organized crime has become an increasingly dynamic and multifaceted problem, with novel criminal markets and techniques

developing due to globalization, geopolitical tensions, and technological progress.

The financial contribution of significant organized crime within the EU is significant, as are the political and social ones, along with the detrimental effects on the health of EU citizens. As a result of mounting interconnection, internationalization, and digitalization of organized crime, Member States increasingly need cross-border and EU-level cooperation to assist their law enforcement authorities.

Particularly, migrant smuggling has become a profitable business for criminal networks, with estimated revenues of billions of euros each year across the world. Smugglers use land, sea, and air routes to organize irregular migration into and within the European Union. This criminal enterprise is increasingly associated with serious human rights abuses and loss of life, particularly in the maritime context. The recent tragic death of migrants at the hands of smugglers in the Mediterranean highlights the need to fight migrant smuggling on all lawful, operational, and administrative fronts. Moreover, the close association of migrant smuggling organizations with other violent organized offenses such as terrorism, trafficking in persons, and money laundering strengthen the call to action from the EU.

In 2025 MEPs will discuss potential amendments to EU legislation aimed at enhancing police cooperation and increasing the effectiveness of sanctions against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling. The discussion, which will include representatives from the Council and the European Commission, is set to focus on the risks of exploitation, abuse, and death that migrants face at the hands of smugglers, as highlighted in a recent UNHCR report. Additionally, it will provide a platform to explore various initiatives from the Commission, including the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, proposals to strengthen criminal penalties for smugglers, and a regulation aimed at bolstering Europol's role in addressing migrant smuggling. MEPs are expected to raise issues related to cooperation with partner countries and international organizations, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the development of safe and legal migration routes to Europe as strategies to combat human trafficking.

In recognition of the seriousness of the situation and a call for joined-up action, the EU has launched several steps to increase greater cooperation between Member States. The EU has established common legal, judicial, and investigative norms in order to combat organized crime. The European Parliament has prioritized the battle against organized crime and has played an important role in creating applicable EU legislation. In the future, the EU efforts will be targeted at enforcement of existing legislation, enhancing internal

and external cooperation, and increasing information exchange, and, at the same time, destabilizing central activities of organized crime groups and targeting most serious criminal networks. The EU is also determined to make crime payless.

Organized crime undoubtedly represents one of the most significant challenges facing the EU today, making it crucial to consider what changes the EU might implement and the potential impacts of those changes. Furthermore, this publication aims to address questions such as what the main criticisms are regarding the EU's inefficiency if it comes to organized crime.

1. COMPREHENDING THE EU'S APPROACH TO ORGANIZED CRIME

Migrant smuggling and organized crime are closely connected. Organized crime has a significant impact on individuals and communities, with a substantial cost to the EU economy. In 2019, criminal revenues from primary criminal markets reached €139 billion, equivalent to 1% of the EU's GDP. Organized crime groups (OCGs) increasingly partake in multiple types of criminal activities rather than focusing on a single area. By 2021, 80% of OCG activities were associated with drug trafficking, organized property crime, various forms of fraud, and crimes that exploit individuals as commodities. Additionally, OCGs have become more violent, with

over 60% employing violence as part of their methods. The rapidly changing landscape of crime introduces new threats, leading to ongoing discussions about how the EU, in collaboration with Member States and relevant EU agencies, should address these challenges (EPRS, 2022).

The suppression of organized crime is a highly complex endeavor for each country due to the diverse range of activities carried out by various organized crime groups and the connections among them. The challenge intensifies significantly when considering the transnational aspect of organized crime. Today, many organized crime groups in Europe engage in multiple criminal activities, including drug trafficking, human smuggling, money laundering, firearms trafficking, and various other illicit practices. Investigating the relationships between these different criminal activities is a challenging undertaking that requires careful analysis of numerous questions. One crucial element in combating organized crime in Europe is the implementation of a unique and systematic approach aimed at achieving tangible results, which entails establishing a comprehensive system that incorporates various components. This chapter will address whether the EU has an effective strategy for combatting organized crime.

On April 14, 2021, the European Commission introduced a comprehensive new strategy aimed at combating organized crime within the European Union. This initiative is an integral component

of the EU Security Union Strategy¹, which is designed to safeguard European citizens from the dual threats of terrorism and organized crime. The strategy draws significantly on the findings presented in Europol's 2021 Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA)².

The strategy highlights the substantial risks organized crime poses to European citizens, governmental institutions, and the broader economy. Organized crime groups operate across all Member States, utilizing complex business models that span both online and offline platforms. This complexity has been exemplified by the investigation that led to the dismantling of EncroChat in 2020³. The situation is further complicated by the adaptive capacity of these criminal organizations, which can swiftly respond to changes in the socio-economic landscape. For instance, certain organized crime groups have exploited the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic by engaging in the sale of counterfeit vaccines.

Margaritis Schinas, the Vice-President of the Von der Leyen Commission and European Commissioner for Promoting the European Way of Life, affirmed that this strategy aims to weaken the operational framework of organized criminal groups, which often thrive on a lack of coordination among member states (Pingen, 2021).

¹ Online: [eucrim 2/2020, 71–73](#)

² Online: [Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment \(SOCTA\)](#)

³ Online: [eucrim 1/2021, 22–23](#)

Organized crime in the EU is a dynamic and changing environment. In 2024, Europol conducted a comprehensive analysis of the most significant criminal networks operating within the EU, identifying a total of 821 networks comprising approximately 25,000 members engaged in profit-driven criminal activities capable of functioning across multiple countries concurrently. These networks are involved in various criminal sectors, including drug trafficking, fraud, property crime, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking, among others. In its most recent Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA, 2021), Europol underscored the transnational character of organized crime. Over 180 nationalities are implicated in organized crime activities within the EU, and 65% of the active criminal groups are comprised of individuals from multiple nationalities.

Furthermore, 76% of the most significant criminal networks operate across two to seven countries, indicating a relatively focused geographical scope. In contrast to the traditional dominance of hierarchically structured Organized Criminal Groups (OCGs), Europol has observed a shift towards more loosely organized networks that interact with one another to achieve shared criminal goals, or OCGs that revolve around a central group, which constitute 60% of all OCGs. This transition reflects the growing presence of individual criminal entrepreneurs who provide crime-as-a-service (CaaS), functioning either independently or as subcontractors for

these loose networks in a collaborative, ad hoc manner (Luyten, 2024).

According to Dr. Anna Pingen from Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law (MPI CSL) the newly formulated strategy by the EU is structured around four foundational pillars:

1. Enhancing Law Enforcement and Judicial Cooperation

The Commission will expand and modernize the 2010 European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), positioning it as the primary EU mechanism for combating organized and serious international crime. EMPACT is designed to facilitate collaboration among relevant European and national authorities in identifying priority criminal threats and addressing them collectively. Commission will propose enhancements to the 2010 Prüm framework, which enables law enforcement entities to access DNA, fingerprint, and vehicle registration data from the databases of other Member States during criminal investigations as well as advocate for the establishment of an EU Police Cooperation Code. Commission will initiate negotiations to establish cooperation agreements between Eurojust and non-EU countries and intensify discussions on collaboration between Europol and third countries.

2. Facilitating More Effective Investigations to Disrupt Organized Crime Structures, with a Focus on Specific Serious Offenses

The Commission will revise the Environmental Crime Directive. In addition to that Commission will create an EU toolbox specifically geared toward combating the counterfeiting of medical products. Whereas Member States are encouraged to Participate in and strengthen the @ON Network, which aims to enhance cooperation among law enforcement authorities, including Europol, in addressing mafia-type organized crime groups.

3. Eliminating Profits Generated by Organized Crime and Preventing Their Infiltration into the Legal Economy

The Commission will propose a revision of the 2014 Confiscation Directive and the 2007 Council Decision regarding Asset Recovery Offices to broaden the range of criminal offenses covered by these frameworks. Commission will also evaluate the effectiveness of existing EU anti-corruption regulations in addressing current criminal practices.

4. Adapting Law Enforcement and Judicial Systems for the Digital Age

The Commission will identify technical and legal solutions that enable law enforcement authorities to gain lawful access to encrypted information within the context of criminal investigations. Commission will encourage Member States to participate in the e-Evidence Digital Exchange System (e-EDES) as well as develop, in collaboration with its Joint Research Centre, a monitoring tool designed to collect intelligence on illegal activities emerging in the Darknet (Pingen, 2021).

The EU **crime priorities** for the cycle **2022-2025** are: *“identifying and disrupting highrisk criminal networks, targeting the criminal offenders orchestrating cyberattacks, disrupting criminal networks engaged in trafficking in human beings for all forms of exploitation, combating child abuse online and offline, fighting against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling, identifying and targeting criminal networks involved in the production, trafficking and distribution of cannabis, cocaine and heroin as well as synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS), detecting the different forms and aspects of fraud, financial and economic crimes, disrupting criminal networks involved in various forms of organized property crimes and all forms of environmental crimes and*

finally targeting networks and individual criminals involved in the illicit trafficking, distribution and use of firearms” (Ilić, 2025).

According to the 2021 European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), almost 40% of organized crime syndicates are involved in drug production, trafficking, or distribution. Among the most dangerous criminal networks in the EU, 50% engage in drug trafficking, either as a primary activity or as part of a broader array of operations, while 36% focus exclusively on drug trafficking. Other significant criminal activities include economic and financial crimes, migrant smuggling, organized property crime, human trafficking, cybercrime, product counterfeiting, environmental crime, and firearms trafficking. Nearly half of the organized crime groups (OCGs), particularly those engaged in trafficking illicit goods, participate in multiple criminal endeavors to mitigate risks, lower operational costs, and enhance profit margins. These groups are highly adaptable, able to transition swiftly from one activity to another based on the circumstances. Often, OCGs operate on an on-demand basis, activating only when new profit opportunities emerge. While 82% of the most prominent criminal networks focus on a single primary activity—indicating they are typically well-entrenched with significant influence and control over criminal markets—the vast majority also engage in one or more secondary criminal activities to support their main enterprise or as ancillary ventures (Europol, 2021).

Modus Operandi of Organized crime groups (OCGs) is to operate with a singular objective: to generate profits. To achieve this aim, they rapidly adapt their methods, seeking to exert significant control over both the legal economy and the political sphere, and at times, assuming governance roles within certain regions and communities. Europol categorizes those OCGs capable of reinvesting their illicit gains into legitimate business ventures and their own criminal operations as the most formidable threats. This is primarily due to their ability to maintain "business continuity" and further escalate their criminal enterprises; notably, 86% of the most threatening criminal networks leverage legitimate business structures.

The three sectors most adversely impacted by criminal infiltration are construction, hospitality, and logistics. Key criminal activities such as document fraud, money laundering, and the online trade of illicit goods are vital enablers of serious and organized crime. Money laundering, in particular, permits OCGs to integrate the proceeds of crime into the legal economy, employing a variety of techniques that range from the establishment of shell companies and intricate international financial schemes to the use of emerging payment methods, including cryptocurrencies and anonymous payment options. These latter methods present heightened concerns due to their lack of a standardized regulatory framework and the anonymity they provide.

Additionally, money laundering has evolved into a lucrative enterprise in its own right, with certain OCGs offering laundering services to other criminal groups for a fee. The digital dimension of criminal activities has proliferated, with many now having transitioned entirely online. Almost all illicit goods and services are traded through digital platforms, both on the surface web and within the dark web, a trend that accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent recovery phase. Data is increasingly commodified, further complicating the landscape of illicit trade.

Moreover, the online illicit trade is projected to increasingly disrupt conventional markets and established criminal distribution models in the coming years. The majority of the most threatening criminal networks possess a sophisticated understanding of law enforcement methodologies. They employ strategies such as counter-surveillance and infiltrating law enforcement agencies to evade detection, investigation, or prosecution. They also utilize encrypted communication tools, and Europol posits that advancements in artificial intelligence may further empower criminals to implement countermeasures effectively in the future (Luyten, 2024).

Organized crime poses a significant threat to European citizens, businesses, state institutions, and the overall economy. Criminals can seamlessly operate across national borders, necessitating a coordinated response at the European level. In light of the increasing complexity of this issue, the EU continually refines its

strategies, including the establishment of specialized agencies such as Europol, Eurojust, and CEPOL (EC, 2025).

1.1 Efficient System in Fight against Organized Crime as the EU tool

Cross-border law enforcement and judicial cooperation are crucial for tackling security threats within the EU and for the effective operation of the Schengen area. While the primary responsibility for operational activities lies with the Member States, the EU provides extensive support within its authority to help them combat organized crime effectively (Luyten, 2024).

One of the key factors in combating organized crime in Europe is the unique and systematic approach that leads to tangible outcomes. This involves establishing a robust system that encompasses multiple facets. Currently, Europe has a comprehensive and effective system designed to tackle various forms of organized and serious crimes – the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT). EMPACT adopts an integrated approach to the European Union's (EU) internal security, incorporating measures that include external border controls, cooperation among police, customs, and judicial bodies, as well as information management, innovation, training, prevention, the

external aspects of internal security, and public-private partnerships when appropriate (Ilić, 2025).

The reality of the organized crime phenomenon, particularly its transnational nature and the complexity of its operations, has shaped the methods used to combat it in Europe. The development of EMPACT began in 2010 when the EU established the “EU policy cycle for organized and serious international crime.” This four-year cycle was designed to provide greater continuity in the fight against serious international and organized crime. It consists of four stages: policy development (EU SOCTA) along with data from various agencies such as Frontex, Eurojust, and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), now known as the EU Drugs Agency (EUDA). Input also comes from Europol's partners, including third countries, private entities, and open sources (Luyten, 2024) as well as policy setting, implementation and monitoring (OAPs), and evaluation (Review and Assessment). Collectively, this EU policy cycle is known as the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats, or “EMPACT” (Ilić, 2025).

The initial, more limited version of EMPACT was implemented from 2012 to 2013. This was succeeded by two comprehensive EU policy cycles running from 2014 to 2017 and from 2018 to 2021. Over these stages, EMPACT has developed into a flagship initiative for the EU, facilitating multidisciplinary and multi-

agency operational cooperation in the fight against organized crime at the EU level. It emphasizes the need for strong actions to address the most urgent criminal threats confronting the European Union (Ilić, 2025).

For the 2022-2025 policy cycle, the priorities focus on disrupting the activities of organized crime groups (OCGs) and hindering the supports that enable organized crime. Particular emphasis is placed on high-risk criminal networks, including cybercrime, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, child sexual abuse and exploitation, drug trafficking, firearms trafficking, financial and economic crimes, fraud, organized property crime, and environmental crime. In 2025, Europol will release a new SOCTA that will inform the subsequent EU policy cycle on organized and serious international crime (Luyten, 2024).

In 2023, the combined efforts of EMPACT across the EU resulted in significant achievements, including 13,871 arrests, the identification of over 7,500 victims of human trafficking and child sexual abuse, and the seizure of 197 tons of drugs and chemicals, as well as €797 million in criminal assets (Luyten, 2024).

Migrant smuggling is within The EU's priorities for the fight against serious and organised crime for EMPACT 2022-2025 (26 May 2021). This priority particularly aims the following: *“to fight against criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling, in particular those providing facilitation services to irregular migrants*

along the main migratory routes crossing the external border of the EU and those involved in facilitation of secondary movements and legislation of residence status within the EU, particularly focusing on those whose methods endanger people's lives” (EMPACT, 2025).

1.2 The EU's shortcomings in tackling organized crime

The EU can aid in the fight against organized crime by providing support and resources to member states in their efforts to combat this issue effectively. Operational tasks, such as investigating and prosecuting criminals, remain under the jurisdiction of EU member states. The Commission must aim to support these countries in their efforts to combat organized crime more effectively. The EU's initiatives encompass a range of activities from crime prevention to law enforcement, utilizing various tools, including:

- Legislative measures to harmonize regulations regarding offenses related to criminal organizations
- The collection of reliable crime statistics
- The funding of European projects and specialized networks

Modern organized crime necessitates a multidisciplinary approach for effective prevention and response. Consequently, the EU has developed only what is referred to as the “**administrative approach**”. This strategy involves a combination of administrative

tools aimed at preventing organized crime from infiltrating the public sector, the economy, or critical areas of public administration. Preventing such infiltration is just as crucial as combating organized crime through the criminal justice system. While some EU member states are making significant strides in implementing this new approach, others are just beginning to explore it. To promote the development and implementation of this strategy across the EU, the Commission has facilitated the creation of a network of informal contact points for exchanging best practices. Additionally, Europol has provided its infrastructure to facilitate the exchange of administrative information between EU member states at a more operational level (EC, 2025).

Organised crime is a concept that raises strong impressions of particularly serious, systematic, and large-scale criminality. These impressions have had an impact on public discussion of the topic and on public policymakers. However, the serious repercussions of organised crime are not incorporated into the legal definitions adopted at the European level, and thus in the national criminal law orders by virtue of harmonisation. The Union's definition of a "criminal organization" in **Framework Decision 2008/841/JHA** is excessively broad and vague, failing to encompass those characteristics traditionally implied by organized crime. Some authors have pointed out the need for a normatively acceptable legislative framework regarding organized crime within the EU. The

challenge seems to stem from the European legislator's inability to accurately define the fundamental essence of organized crime, as well as the justification for the exceptional measures taken against it. Due to the ambiguity surrounding the 'core' characteristics of organized crime and the absence of a definitive stance at the Union level, the current definition of an organized criminal group as outlined in Framework Decision 2008/841/JHA provides limited insight. It merely states that such a group consists of at least a small number of individuals cooperating to commit specific crimes subject to severe penalties. This broad characterization fails to capture the particular dangers associated with organized crime, which is often cited as the rationale for the heightened repression imposed on those labeled as involved in organized crime (Kemppainen, 2024).

The European Union faces several **shortcomings** in tackling organized crime, despite its comprehensive strategies and frameworks. Here are some key challenges and limitations:

1. Adaptability of Organized Crime Groups – organized crime groups demonstrate a high degree of adaptability, swiftly taking advantage of new opportunities and weaknesses in law enforcement across the EU. This adaptability necessitates ongoing updates to EU strategies to address emerging threats effectively (Pingen, 2025; EPRS, 2022).
2. Coordination and Data Sharing – inefficiencies in data sharing and coordination among member states can impede the effectiveness of agencies like Europol. Legal and procedural discrepancies between

member states often result in delays in executing mechanisms such as the European Arrest Warrant (EAW) (Meylan, 2024).

3. Technological Challenges – the growing reliance on digital tools by organized crime groups presents substantial challenges. Ensuring lawful access to encrypted data and enhancing digital forensics capabilities remain ongoing issues for EU law enforcement⁴ (Pingen, 2025).

4. Border Management and Migration – weaknesses in border management provide opportunities for human trafficking networks to exploit migrants and refugees, underscoring the need for improved border control strategies (Meylan, 2024).

5. Implementation Speed and Effectiveness – the success of EU strategies relies on the promptness and efficacy of their implementation. Delays in rolling the measures can undermine efforts to dismantle organized crime networks (EPRS, 2022).

6. Resource Allocation and Prioritization – the EU must strategically allocate resources across various criminal threats, prioritizing those that pose the greatest risks. This includes a focus on high-impact crimes such as drug trafficking and human trafficking⁵ (Pingen, 2023).

⁴ Online:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729338/EPRS_ATAG\(2022\)729338_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729338/EPRS_ATAG(2022)729338_EN.pdf)

⁵ Online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-fight-against-crime/>



Source: European Data Journalism Network, 2025

2. MIGRANT SMUGGLING AND CRIME

In human history, people have always moved. But never before has the smuggling business been so profitable, and so deadly. Human mobility is a fact of life. Migrant smuggling should not be. It can be defeated. It is a matter of political will. And we can only succeed together.

Ursula von der Leyen at the International Conference on a Global Alliance to Counter Smuggling (EC, 2023)

Over 90% of individuals who enter the European Union (EU) irregularly do so with the help of migrant smugglers. The facilitation of unauthorized migration has become a lucrative criminal enterprise, given the relatively low risks faced by those involved. Instances of irregular border crossings have reached their highest levels since 2016, coinciding with a significant rise in demand for migration facilitation services.

This heightened demand stems not only from individuals in dire situations—whether due to genuine threats to their lives or economic hardships—who continue to seek entry into the EU through irregular methods, but also from the increasing difficulty of illegally crossing the EU's external borders. Enhanced border controls and other measures aimed at curbing irregular migration have made crossing even more challenging, creating opportunities for migrant smuggling networks (Luyten, 2023).

Migrant smugglers are among the most resourceful criminals, taking extensive measures to evade capture and rapidly adjusting their routes and techniques for transporting migrants into, within, or out of the EU. The facilitation of irregular migration is a multifaceted crime that is linked to various other criminal activities, including document fraud, human trafficking, and different forms of illicit smuggling. The organizations involved in migrant smuggling are becoming increasingly sophisticated, professional, and violent. While individuals choose to pay smugglers for assistance in crossing

borders, they do so at significant personal risk, with many facing the threats of serious harm or exploitation, or even death. The migrant smuggling industry is estimated to generate between €4.7 billion and €6 billion in profits each year (UNODC, 2018).

Frontex anticipates that ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, along with other unstable geopolitical conditions and issues such as climate change and extreme weather, could lead to new waves of mass migration towards the EU, ultimately exacerbating the migrant smuggling crisis and heightening the risk of terrorists infiltrating these migrant groups. In addition to natural migration flows, Frontex also believes that state actors will continue to exploit migration for their own ends, possibly intensifying these practices (Luyten, 2024).

While individuals may voluntarily pay smugglers to assist them in crossing borders, they do so at significant personal risk, with many losing their lives or facing severe harm or exploitation. Thus, preventing and combating migrant smuggling and related crimes is a central focus of the EU's efforts against irregular migration and organized crime. The European Parliament has consistently advocated for enhanced operational cooperation, data sharing, and legal pathways for migration. In response, the European Commission has recently proposed new legislation aimed at dismantling the business model of smugglers (Luyten, 2023).

Human trafficking is a despicable crime that fundamentally violates basic human rights and dignity. It occurs not only across national borders but also within countries. This crime is facilitated through fraud, deception, threats, and coercion, often for purposes such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ trafficking, among other forms of human trafficking (CCCPA, 2025).

Each year, thousands of individuals are trafficked within the EU and subjected to various forms of exploitation or involved in other illegal activities. A 2020 study by the European Commission estimates the economic impact of human trafficking in the EU to be as high as €2.7 billion annually. While the majority of trafficking victims worldwide are women and girls, the number of trafficked men is increasing, particularly for labor exploitation. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the detection rates for trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor are nearly equal, each accounting for just under 40%. This shift reflects a recent decline in reported cases of sexual exploitation trafficking globally and in Europe, alongside a consistent rise in forced labor cases, which have increased from 18% in 2006. On average, around 7,000 people per year fall victim to human trafficking in the EU. The most common form of exploitation remains sexual (51%), followed by labor exploitation (28%), and other types of exploitation (11%), which include forced criminal activities, coerced begging, illegal adoption, forced or sham

marriages, illegal surrogacy, and the illicit removal of organs (Luyten, 2023).

Migrant smuggling⁶ is a transnational crime involving the illegal facilitation of a person's entry into a country where they are neither a national nor a resident, carried out for financial or other gains. Due to their irregular status, migrants—especially women and children—are particularly vulnerable to a wide range of threats that jeopardize their physical safety, well-being, and fundamental rights. Irregular migrants may face risks to their physical and mental health, as well as susceptibility to exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking (CCCPA, 2025).

Both human trafficking and migrant smuggling pose significant challenges for origin, transit, and destination countries. In origin and transit countries, these crimes undermine development, challenge the rule of law and state sovereignty, disrupt legitimate economies, and jeopardize the safety and livelihoods of millions. For receiving countries, they create substantial economic, political, and security challenges. In Africa and the Middle East – the European Union's southern and eastern neighbors, the dual issues of human

⁶ Migrant smuggling and human trafficking often intersect, with smuggled migrants potentially becoming victims of trafficking during their journeys. However, they are two distinct criminal activities governed by different legal and policy frameworks at both the EU and international levels. While migrant smuggling is always a transnational crime, this is not necessarily true for human trafficking. Individuals who are trafficked typically do not consent to this crime, except in cases where they are initially smuggled and subsequently fall into the hands of traffickers. Furthermore, traffickers primarily aim to exploit individuals for profit, while smugglers profit from facilitating transportation or irregular entry and stay in another country (Luyten, 2023).

trafficking and migrant smuggling are particularly urgent and severe. Factors such as conflict, state collapse, prolonged instability, and the erosion of the rule of law create environments that allow traffickers and smugglers to operate with impunity. Concurrently, poverty, unemployment, and a lack of economic opportunities drive crises-affected populations toward harmful coping mechanisms.

The critical role of states in addressing the transnational threats posed by human trafficking and migrant smuggling is outlined in existing international and regional legal frameworks, notably *the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* and its accompanying *Palermo Protocols: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, and *the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air*. However, challenges in implementation continue. Many states in Africa still lack the capacity, resources, data, national legislation, and strategies needed to effectively combat these crimes. Eradicating human trafficking is also essential to achieving gender equality, decent work, economic growth, and peace and justice as outlined in *the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda*. Promoting safe, orderly, regular, and responsible migration is also a critical objective for reducing inequalities in the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (CCCPA, 2025).

This chapter discusses the specific steps suggested by the EU to create safe and legal migration routes to Europe as a means of preventing human trafficking. It also examines how the EU is modifying its strategies to dismantle the criminal networks involved in organized immigration crime, as well as the roles that agencies such as Europol and Eurojust play in gathering intelligence to combat the activities of organized criminal groups. Furthermore, the chapter analyzes how enhancing legislation and fostering international cooperation can improve efforts to address organized immigration crime.



Source: UN, 2024

2.1 The role of organized crime in migrant smuggling in the EU

Smuggling migrants is not only a crime against international conventions and the interest of the States to control and protect their borders but also a crime against human dignity because smugglers exploit vulnerable individuals and their expectations for a better life. With the focus group, we wish to bring together all actors in the security and criminal justice chain across the European Union to advance the Union's response against these hideous crimes.'

Filippo Spiezia, National Member of Eurojust for Italy and Chairman of Eurojust's Anti-Trafficking Team (Eurojust, 2020)

Migrant smuggling to and within the EU is reaching unprecedented levels, driven by a rising demand stemming from various emerging and escalating crises, including economic recessions, environmental emergencies related to climate change, conflicts, and demographic pressures in numerous third countries. This rise in migrant smuggling contributes to an increase in irregular arrivals to the EU: in 2022, approximately 331,000 irregular entries were detected at the EU's external borders, marking the highest level since 2016 and representing a 66% increase from the previous year. By the end of September 2023, around 281,000 irregular border crossings had been recorded at the EU's external borders, indicating an 18% rise compared to the same period in 2022. This trend aligns with increased smuggling activities, as evidenced by a record number

of over 15,000 migrant smugglers reported to Frontex by Member States in 2022. Given the rise in irregular arrivals in 2023 and the ongoing global crises across various countries of origin and transit, it is expected that migratory flows to Europe and associated smuggling-related criminal activities will remain consistently high and may even increase further (EUR-Lex, 2023).

According to *the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling*, migrant smuggling is a widespread and significant global issue. It constitutes a criminal activity under both international and European law, undermining human life and dignity in the pursuit of financial or other material gain. Smuggling networks are frequently part of well-organized multinational criminal organizations, exploiting the vulnerability of migrants, often resulting in violence, abuse, exploitation, and even loss of life.

Criminal operations in this domain are extensive, interconnected throughout every phase of the journey—from countries of origin to transit and destination countries. Smuggling generates billions of euros in profit, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimating annual earnings to be between EUR 4.7 billion and EUR 6 billion worldwide. Migrant smugglers are often involved in various criminal activities, including human trafficking, drug trafficking, and arms dealing, utilizing highly adaptable and constantly changing tactics. They also rely on

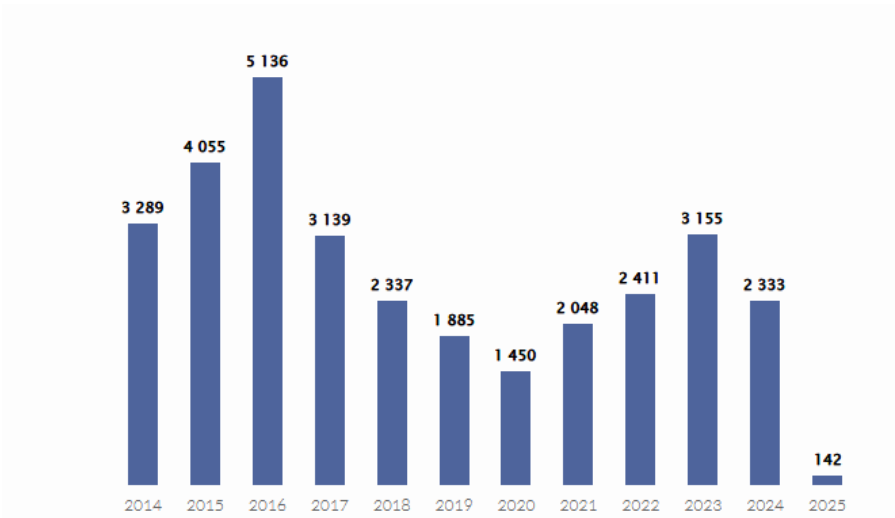
digital tools, such as online platforms and electronic communication, for coordination, enabling them to remain concealed.

The scope of migrant smuggling has reached alarming and destructive levels. The unchecked and irregular arrivals resulting from smuggling strain systems and hinder effective migration management. Managing people's mobility must be accomplished through appropriate policies and legislation rather than relying on smugglers. A comprehensive and sustainable approach to mobility requires a combination of strong, effective actions alongside constructive partnerships with countries of origin and transit. This involves addressing the root causes of irregular migration while simultaneously combating organized crime, including migrant smuggling and human trafficking (EC – Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, 2023).

Smuggling networks generate significant profits from their illicit activities, with global estimates ranging from EUR 4.7 to 6 billion annually. Consequently, delivering a strong and decisive response to the activities of smugglers is essential for reducing irregular migration. Since 2014, the ruthless activities of migrant smugglers, particularly at sea, have led to a staggering death toll of over 28,000 individuals and over 31,000 missing migrants.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that since 2014, nearly 60,000 migrants have either lost their lives or gone missing during smuggling operations demonstrated in **Table 1** (IOM, 2 025).

Table1



Dead and missing by year, Source: IOM, 2025

Approximately half of the migrant smuggling networks are also engaged in other criminal enterprises, such as human trafficking, drug and firearms smuggling, as well as facilitating unauthorized movements within the EU. Law enforcement and judicial authorities face a multitude of ongoing and evolving challenges, including the rapidly changing tactics employed by smugglers; an increase in

threats and violence directed at both migrants and law enforcement officials; the difficulty of locating and arresting smugglers who operate from countries outside the EU; the use of a wide range of transportation methods, including unseaworthy and less detectable vessels (such as fishing boats and makeshift metal boats), as well as road vehicles in which migrants are dangerously concealed, and commercial or charter flights used to transport migrants to countries near or bordering the EU, from where they attempt to enter the EU irregularly; the employment of digital tools throughout the process, including online advertisements for smuggling services, routes, and prices, as well as document forgery; and the adoption of cryptocurrencies, digital money, or other informal payment methods (e.g., hawala) (Europol, 2023).

Migrant smuggling is highly profitable, with most smugglers motivated by financial gain. Europol estimates that in 2019 alone, smugglers earned approximately €190 million on Mediterranean routes. During the peak of the migration crisis in 2015, these criminal networks had an estimated turnover between €3 and €6 billion. Smuggling costs vary widely; for instance, crossing the western Mediterranean averaged €2,500 per person, while the eastern Mediterranean land route averaged €1,500. Prices surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, with sea passage to Italy rising to between €6,000 and €12,000 per person in 2022, making it one of the priciest European routes (Luyten, 2023).

Europol characterizes migrant smuggling as a low-risk venture with ongoing demand and minimal resource requirements. Unlike other cross-border crimes, it isn't dominated by mafia organizations; instead, various actors engage in the process, including recruiters, coordinators, transporters, and those providing services like accommodation or fraudulent documentation (Europol, 2021).

Corruption plays a significant role in the prevalence of migrant smuggling by weakening immigration controls and border security. Around 50%⁷ of criminal groups focus solely on this activity; however, many facilitators also engage in related crimes, including document fraud and human trafficking, as well as other illicit activities such as drug and weapon smuggling, and money laundering. These networks leverage their knowledge of smuggling routes, often treating irregular migrants as commodities, which heightens the risk of various forms of exploitation.

Organized crime groups involved in migrant smuggling vary in size and often collaborate with other criminal networks or individual service providers, such as drivers. Most active networks in the EU consist of both EU and non-EU nationals, predominantly non-EU adult males, with smugglers typically sharing the same nationality as the migrants. Smuggling services range from

⁷ Europol – SOCTA, Online: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/socta2021_1.pdf

comprehensive packages to a "pay-as-you-go" model, showcasing versatility in routes, transport methods, and concealment techniques. As noted by a European Commission study, smuggling is fundamentally a *supply-and-demand-driven* business (Europol, 2023; Luyten, 2023).

2.2 Refugee influx and criminal activity – “the destination EU”

People migrate for a variety of reasons, primarily in pursuit of a better quality of life or the need for protection. The EU's relative economic prosperity and political stability are considered significant factors attracting migrants. According to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) Risk Analyses for 2020 and 2023/2024, one of the major motivations for both regular and irregular migration to and within the EU is the presence of a diaspora in the host Member State. Other elements that make the EU an appealing destination include its proximity to crises in the Middle East and North Africa, limited economic opportunities in migrants' home countries (such as those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America), an established smuggling infrastructure in key transit areas, and access to paths for legalization for individuals with irregular status upon arrival in the EU. The most sought-after EU countries are those that offer ample employment opportunities at any given time, as noted in a Commission study on migrant smuggling (Frontex, 2020; Luyten, 2023).

As global populations continue to rise, particularly in regions facing economic instability, conflict, and climate change, migratory pressure towards the EU is expected to remain high, leading to increased demand for migration facilitation services. A significant number of irregular migrants traverse approximately a dozen non-EU countries before reaching the EU's external borders, including Albania, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Ukraine. These countries form key migratory routes:

- **Eastern Mediterranean Route:** Sea and land crossings from Türkiye.
- **Western Mediterranean Route:** Crossings from Morocco and Algeria to Spain.
- **Western Balkan Route:** Land crossings from Greece to central/western Europe.
- **Central Mediterranean Route:** Sea crossings to Italy and Malta from North Africa.
- **West African Route:** Sea crossings to the Canary Islands from Morocco and Senegal.
- **Circular Route:** Between Albania and Greece.
- **Eastern Borders Route:** Land crossings from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova.
- **Channel Route:** Sea crossings from continental Europe to the UK (Luyten, 2023).

Migratory pressure on these routes fluctuates due to factors like border controls and geopolitical changes. According to the Frontex Risk Analysis for 2023/2024⁸, detections surged from 200,101 in 2021 to 331,553 in 2022, primarily due to fewer detections on the Mediterranean routes, influenced by the war in Ukraine. The Western Balkan route saw the highest crossings, predominantly from Serbia, with increased detection of Tunisians, Indians, and Burundians, exploiting visa-free access in some areas. The central Mediterranean route became the busiest maritime path, accounting for 71% of sea detections, including a record number of minors. While most detections occurred at land borders, repeat irregular crossings significantly inflated numbers on the Western Balkan routes. Notably, secondary movements within the EU increased by 92%⁹ compared to 2021, driven by varying reception conditions and integration opportunities across EU Member States.

In the summer of 2021, a significant influx of migrants began arriving in Belarus, prompting Latvia and Lithuania to seek European assistance for border security. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) responded by deploying border guards in July. The majority of migrants, primarily from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, were accused by several EU member states

⁸ Frontex, Online: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map/>

⁹ Frontex, Online: https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/General/ARA_2023.pdf#page=26

of being encouraged by Belarus through increased direct flights from the Middle East and relaxed visa entry requirements. Reports indicated that Belarusian authorities provided assistance, including cutting gaps in Polish border fencing to facilitate crossings.

The situation escalated as eastern EU member states expressed concerns about the security implications of the migrant influx. In response to rising undocumented crossings and expanding migrant camps at the Belarusian border, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland declared states of emergency. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki characterized Belarus's actions as state terrorism, framing the situation as a security threat. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen echoed this perspective, describing the events to U.S. President Joe Biden as "a hybrid attack, not a migration crisis." These concerns were reminiscent of accusations during the Syrian refugee crisis, where NATO Commander Philip Breedlove claimed Russia and Syria were weaponizing migration to destabilize Europe. In November 2021, tensions escalated further as Poland deployed 12,000 troops to its Belarusian border to deter crossings, with Lithuania and Latvia also reinforcing their borders (Klein, 2021).



Source: EP Multimedia Centre, 2025

Migrant smugglers' methods vary based on the type of travel, which is influenced by the destination, route, and the price migrants are willing to pay. Smugglers provide transportation not only to the EU but also within the EU and from the EU to other regions. Due to the length of routes, criminal networks often utilize multiple modes of transport—by land, sea, and air¹⁰.

Sea crossings typically involve overcrowded boats with minimal safety equipment, and many reach the EU without an accompanying smuggler. While smugglers have connections in

¹⁰ Europol, Online: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/criminal-networks-in-migrant-smuggling>

source, transit, and destination countries, most remain in the last departure country. The European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) notes that smugglers are increasingly ruthless, putting migrants' lives at greater risk¹¹.

In land crossings, various vehicles are used, or migrants may walk, especially over rough terrain. Recently, bicycles and scooters have also been employed. The EMSC reports that irregular migrants traveling overland, including those in secondary movements, are often confined in dark, airtight cargo compartments under inhumane and dangerous conditions. Those unable to afford smuggling services tend to share online and offline maps detailing hiding spots and safe crossing points¹².

Air travel is the least common method due to its higher costs and strict airport controls. Many migrants resort to using fraudulent documents or exploit transit visas to enter the EU by claiming asylum at transit airports. Others may fly legally to neighboring countries and then attempt to reach the EU with smuggler assistance (Luyten, 2023).

In case of non-EU immigrants, most of them enter the EU through legal channels. By the end of 2021, the majority of residence permits issued in the EU were for family reasons (36%), followed by

¹¹ Europol, Online: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/migrant-smugglers-and-human-traffickers-to-become-more-ruthless-and-clandestine-says-new-europol-report>

¹² Europol, EMSC 4th ANNUAL ACTIVITY REPORT – 2020. Online: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/emsc-4th-annual-activity-report-%e2%80%93-2020>

other reasons (33%) and work-related purposes (18%). Educational permits accounted for 4%, while asylum applications comprised 9%. Nevertheless, many non-EU immigrants attempt to remain in or reach the EU using irregular methods, such as overstaying their visas or crossing external borders without authorization. The lack of access to safe and legal migration pathways fuels the demand for smuggling services. While exact numbers for irregular flows are difficult to determine due to their concealed nature, it is estimated that over one million irregular migrants arrived in the EU in 2015, primarily by sea, but also through overland routes during the peak of the 'migration crisis.' In 2019, irregular arrivals returned to more typical levels, with 141,846 detections representing the lowest figures since 2013, down 92% from 2015. However, in the first ten months of 2023, detections surged to nearly 331,600, marking an 18% increase compared to the same period in 2022, according to preliminary calculations from Frontex. This figure represents the highest total since 2016 (Luyten, 2023).

2.4 Europol's involvement in combating migrant smuggling

In 2016, Europol inaugurated the **European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC)** with the aim of actively assisting EU Member States in dismantling organized migrant smuggling criminal networks. The Centre will concentrate on geographical hotspots for

crime and enhance the EU's overall capacity to combat people smuggling operations¹³.

Europol has identified that many migrants rely on criminal organizations to facilitate their journeys, particularly for the initial sea crossing into Europe. These facilitation services often involve dangerous sea crossings in overcrowded and inadequate vessels. This has led to migrant smuggling becoming a highly profitable criminal enterprise that evades and exploits the maritime border countermeasures implemented by EU Member States and Agencies.

Consequently, addressing this multi-billion-euro trade has become a crucial component of the EU's response to the migrant crisis. The EU's Migration Agenda (2015) highlights the fight against migrant smuggling as a top priority.

Therefore, the primary goal of the EMSC is to support police and border authorities in coordinating complex cross-border anti-smuggling operations, bringing together some of Europe's top investigators. The EMSC works closely with partner EU Agencies that focus on judicial cooperation (Eurojust) and border management (Frontex)¹⁴.

Europol is pivotal in facilitating operational cooperation among Member States through secure information sharing, expertise,

¹³ Europol, Online: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/europol-launches-european-migrant-smuggling-centre#downloads>

¹⁴ Europol, Online: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/european-serious-and-organised-crime-centre-esocc/european-migrant-smuggling-centre-emsc>

and analytical support. In 2016, the agency established the European Serious Organized Crime Centre (ESOCC), which includes the EMSC. The EMSC tracks the online activities of smugglers, delivers operational and strategic analytical assistance, conducts investigations into organized crime related to migrant smuggling, and coordinates law enforcement efforts to dismantle criminal networks involved in both migrant smuggling and human trafficking. A key component of this effort is Europol's Joint Operational Team (JOT) Mare, which focuses on combating migrant smugglers in the Mediterranean. Additionally, Europol's Internet Referral Unit monitors online content and helps prevent smuggling by referring illegal pages to relevant platforms for removal.

In 2022, Europol's mandate was strengthened to enhance its operational capabilities and support Member States in addressing serious crimes and terrorism, while also improving its data protection framework under the oversight of the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) (Luyten, 2024).

According to its website, Europol aligns its activities with the needs of EU Member States by analyzing crime trends and supporting their investigations, although it does not conduct arrests or initiate investigations itself. Its operations typically involve crimes necessitating international collaboration, with priorities determined by the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Crime Threats (EMPACT) (Europol, 2024).

Europol operates under Article 88 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), which outlines its mission to prevent and combat serious cross-border crime and terrorism. The article delineates two primary tasks: the collection and exchange of information, and the coordination of joint operational actions with Member States, including through joint investigation teams (JITs). Europol's activities are subject to scrutiny by national parliaments and the European Parliament while the EDPS oversees its data processing (Cîrlig, 2022).

In alignment with the Lisbon Treaty, the Europol Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/794) replaced the earlier Europol Decision on 1 May 2017, enhancing data management and protection and establishing the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group (JPSG) for oversight. This regulation guarantees individuals' rights to access their data and seek redress for unlawful processing, with reviews scheduled every five years (EUR-Lex, 2016; Cîrlig, 2022). Regulation (EU) 2022/991, enacted on 8 June 2022, further amended the 2016 regulation regarding Europol's collaboration with private entities and the processing of personal data for criminal investigations.

Among the EU crime priorities for the 2018-2021 policy cycle is the EMPACT priority focusing on the Facilitation of Illegal Immigration (FII). EMPACT FII serves as a structured, multidisciplinary cooperation platform for EU Member States aimed

at disrupting organized criminal groups involved in facilitating illegal immigration. Central to this initiative are the annually updated Operational Action Plans, which outline significant operational activities conducted by EU countries and agencies, including Europol, Frontex, Eurojust, CEPOL, and eu-LISA, in combating migrant smuggling. The European Commission has indicated that for the 2022-2025 period, EMPACT will maintain a dedicated focus on migrant smuggling and will engage in discussions regarding the Operational Action Plans, offering financial support for their implementation (European Commission, 2024). The EU has undertaken decisive measures to target criminal networks exploiting vulnerable migrants. EMPACT identified combating the facilitation of irregular migration as a key priority for 2022-2025. In 2022, coordinated actions by Member States resulted in: 3,646 arrests; 3,285 investigations; €2,267,655 in cash seized; thousands of fraudulent documents confiscated (European Council/Council of the European Union, 2024).

To enhance efforts against migrant smuggling, **Eurojust** established a Focus Group of Prosecutors and Investigative Judges in April 2020, comprising specialized prosecutors and judges from EU Member States. This initiative aims to connect key judicial actors within the EU's security and criminal justice sectors, reinforcing operational responses to migrant smuggling. The EMSC from Europol also participates in this effort. The focus group acts as a vital

platform for national judicial authorities to collaborate on addressing migrant smuggling, facilitating the exchange of expertise with Eurojust's support. Its primary objectives include:

- Sharing best practices from significant migrant smuggling investigations
- Analyzing trends and operational tactics employed by organized crime groups (OCGs)
- Examining the effects of changes in migrant smuggling routes
- Gathering insights on current challenges from judicial practitioners and discussing opportunities for enhanced cooperation

During its inaugural meeting in November 2020, the focus group addressed emerging smuggling trends, shared practitioners' experiences, and reviewed Eurojust's Casework report on sham marriages, a critical facilitator of irregular migration. Since 2012, the EU has highlighted the importance of effective cooperation in countering marriages of convenience, which exploit women and lead to human trafficking and abuse. The November 2020 report outlined cross-border investigative efforts against these sham marriages, illustrating how OCGs exploit varying national laws by leveraging jurisdictions with lenient penalties.

Based on these findings, Eurojust recommended a comprehensive approach involving civil registries and consulates to combat this fraud and abuse effectively. Additionally, strengthening judicial cooperation and coordinating investigations, particularly through Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), would significantly bolster efforts to dismantle such exploitative practices (Eurojust, 2020).

The Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and Council seeks to enhance police cooperation in preventing, detecting, and investigating migrant smuggling and human trafficking while bolstering Europol's support in these areas, particularly through the EMSC. As detailed by the European Parliamentary Research Service, the proposal includes several key components.

It aims to legally establish the EMSC within Europol as an expertise center for combating these crimes, governed by a framework that supports its activities. Responsibilities of the EMSC encompass strategic analysis, threat assessments, coordination of cross-border investigations, and monitoring of migrant smuggling activities.

The proposal also calls for the designation of specialized services in each Member State to combat migrant-related crimes and to share information with Europol through the Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA). Additionally, it plans to equip Europol with advanced tools for operational task forces,

allowing for coordinated intelligence activities with Member States and potential third-country participation.

Europol will also be enabled to deploy officers to Member States to assist with analytical and operational support and to conduct investigative measures, contingent upon national laws and the consent of relevant authorities. Support operations should align with the Europol Regulation and be authorized by the Executive Director.

Moreover, the proposal emphasizes improving cooperation with third countries by involving migration liaison officers to enhance information sharing against migrant smuggling. It also recognizes the need for data transfer provisions related to criminal investigations while expanding Europol's jurisdiction to include violations of EU restrictive measures (EUR-Lex. 2023).

The legislative initiative will impact Europol's budget, requiring an additional €50 million and approximately 50 staff posts for the 2021-2027 framework period. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is anticipated to provide its opinion on the proposal by May 2024 and will evaluate the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund for the 2014-2020 period, guiding discussions on effectiveness, relevance, and civil society participation (EESC, 2024).

2. 5 EU strategy and tools to tackle migration related crime

As it is written in the official EU documents – organized crime poses a significant threat to European citizens, businesses, state institutions, and the overall economy, necessitating cohesive action at the European level due to the cross-border nature of criminal activity. In response to the increasing complexity of this issue, the EU has established specialized agencies, including Europol, Eurojust, and CEPOL. In April 2021 the European Commission adopted the EU Strategy to tackle organised crime for the period 2021-2025. This Strategy outlines key priorities and actions aimed at addressing the operational methods of criminal networks, enhancing law enforcement and judicial cooperation, disrupting criminal structures, targeting high-priority crimes, and curbing the financial gains of organized crime while ensuring that law enforcement and the judiciary are equipped for the digital age (EC – Migration and Home Affairs, 2025).

Europol serves as the EU's central hub for criminal information exchange within the justice and home affairs agencies, offering operational support and expertise for Member States' criminal investigations. In addressing serious and organized crime, Europol aligns its assistance with the priorities outlined in the 2022-2025 policy cycle. To enhance its support, the agency has established several specialized centers focused on organized crime. Strengthened in 2022, Europol's mandate has recently been proposed for further

reinforcement in combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking. With 25 years of successful operations and various training and capacity-building initiatives, Europol has demonstrated its significant role in combating serious crime within the EU (Luyten, 2024).

According to European Commission through the EU policy cycle and its EMPACT priorities of "Facilitation of Illegal Immigration" (2018-2021) and "Migrant Smuggling" (2022-2025), EU countries, agencies, international organizations, and third countries collaborate to address migrant smuggling. Europol, the European Union Agency for law enforcement cooperation, plays a crucial role by facilitating operational collaboration among Member States through secure information exchange, expertise, and analytical support. Its European Migrant Smuggling Centre aids investigations, including financial inquiries, enhancing coordination among law enforcement agencies. The Internet Referral Unit of Europol contributes by supporting digital investigations and monitoring online content related to migrant smuggling, referring such links to relevant platforms for removal.

Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, ensures EU border security by patrolling external borders, collecting intelligence on smuggling routes, and providing operational support, including satellite imagery and interventions in non-EU countries.

Other EU agencies, such as CEPOL, Eurojust, EUAA, FRA, and EMSA, also contribute to efforts against migrant smuggling. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum emphasizes the importance of creating comprehensive partnerships with key countries of origin and transit to improve migration management, support refugees, address the root causes of irregular migration, and establish legal pathways to attract skills to Europe, with counter-smuggling measures being a vital component.

Additionally, the Anti-Smuggling Operational Partnerships are designed to strengthen cooperation with partner countries in combatting migrant smuggling through coordinated legal strategies and enhanced frameworks. Successful implementation relies on support from EU country authorities, EU agencies like Europol and Frontex, and financial resources from various EU funds, aligned with partner countries' strategies.

To further manage migration, the EU is developing common operational partnerships focused on law enforcement and judicial cooperation against migrant smuggling. The 2019 establishment of the European network of immigration liaison officers aims to enhance coordination among officers deployed in third countries, focusing on information sharing and facilitating return and reintegration efforts while building capacity within local authorities (EC – Migration and Home Affairs, 2024).

The current financial turmoil underscores the rise of financial crime, including tax fraud, identity theft, and money laundering. Enhanced cooperation between EU Member States is essential for effectively freezing, confiscating, and recovering the proceeds of crime, as highlighted in the Commission's recent proposal for a new Directive on asset recovery and confiscation. Efforts also encompass promoting EU-wide standards for financial investigations and increasing the use of joint investigation teams.

Counterfeiting and intellectual property infringements are becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly regarding commodity goods and pharmaceuticals, posing risks to consumer health and safety while undermining legitimate businesses. This lucrative criminal activity rivals drug and firearms trafficking in profitability, albeit at lesser risk. The EU's initiatives against drug trafficking are closely linked to combating organized crime and protecting health, with organized crime groups earning approximately EUR 230 billion annually from illegal drug trade.

To address these challenges, the EU has developed a comprehensive approach implemented via an Action Plan focusing on drug supply, demand, harm reduction, international cooperation, and coordination among Member States. In light of the rising threats, the Commission has intensified efforts against drug trafficking and its associated networks, unveiling an EU Roadmap to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. This Roadmap complements the EU

Strategy on Organized Crime and the Drugs Strategy, detailing targeted actions for implementation in 2024 and 2025 that include enhancing logistical hub resilience through a European Ports Alliance, dismantling criminal networks, and bolstering international collaboration.

In combating organized crime, the operational responsibility lies with EU Member States, while the Commission aims to enhance their effectiveness through various tools, including legislative measures to harmonize rules related to criminal organizations, reliable crime statistics gathering, and funding for European projects and specialized networks. To counter modern organized crime effectively, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. The EU has introduced the *administrative approach*, a combination of administrative tools to prevent organized crime from infiltrating public sectors and the economy. Some Member States are advancing in this area, while others are just beginning to adopt it. To further develop and implement this approach across the EU, the Commission has facilitated the establishment of a network for exchanging best practices, with Europol providing infrastructure for the exchange of administrative information among EU Member States (EC – Migration and Home Affairs, 2024).

In the last legislative term, several legislative proposals were initiated and adopted to combat serious and organized crime, including an ambitious anti-money laundering package, a revision of

the Environmental Crime Directive (99/2008/EC), updates to the mandates of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA, now EUDA) and Europol, measures for firearms export authorization and import transit, as well as regulations on asset freezing, confiscation, and anti-trafficking efforts. Notably, temporary rules regarding the detection and removal of child sexual abuse were also enacted.

Ongoing work includes the development of a new legislative package to prevent and combat migrant smuggling, an anti-corruption package¹⁵, and a revision of regulations aimed at enhancing the prevention, detection, investigation, and prosecution of terrorism and serious crime. Additional initiatives aim to strengthen victims' rights and establish permanent measures for detecting and removing child sexual abuse material, including a revision of the directive on combating child sexual abuse.

Alongside these legislative efforts, several non-legislative files were adopted, notably a new strategy to tackle organized crime for 2021-2025¹⁶. This strategy outlines tools and measures to disrupt the business models of criminal cross-border organizations, enhance cooperation among law enforcement and judicial authorities, eliminate criminal profits, and combat the infiltration of the legal economy.

¹⁵ EP, Action Plan On Preventing Money Laundering And Terrorist Financing, Online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/package-anti-money-laundering-action-plan>

¹⁶ EUR-Lex, Online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TEXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0170>

To address key criminal activities undertaken by organized crime groups (OCGs), the Commission also introduced an EU agenda and action plans targeting drug use, firearms trafficking, and migrant smuggling, along with strategies for combating human trafficking and enhancing the effectiveness of the fight against online child sexual abuse. In October 2023, the Commission released a roadmap aimed at strengthening efforts against drug trafficking and organized crime, outlining targeted actions in four priority areas: enhancing port resilience to criminal activities, dismantling high-risk criminal networks, sharing best practices among Member States, and collaborating with global partners on security threats. During the last legislature, significant progress was made in law enforcement cooperation with third countries, highlighted by the establishment of an EU support hub for internal security and border management in Moldova. Additionally, cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean was enhanced to tackle organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism financing, while structured internal security dialogues were initiated in areas such as firearms trafficking and border management, including a Cyber Dialogue with Ukraine. EU agencies, including Europol, Eurojust, Frontex, and ENISA, also signed cooperation agreements with partner countries to facilitate information exchange in combating organized crime, terrorism, and cybersecurity threats (Luyten, 2024).

The key focus should be **enhancing border management and security** in the EU. Therefore, to better manage and secure its external borders, the EU established the European Border and Coast Guard Agency on May 30, 2016. This agency acts as a unifying body that brings together Frontex and the national authorities responsible for border control. A crucial function of this agency is to monitor and oversee migration flows into and within the EU. Additionally, the European Return Office, which is part of this agency, plays a vital role in facilitating the return of migrants residing illegally in the EU. However, despite these initiatives, the EU's return rate—the percentage of refugees repatriated to their home countries—remains low. The **effective return rate** across the EU fell from 45.8% in 2016 to only 36.6% in 2017, with national practices varying significantly and not fully leveraging the flexibility allowed by existing regulations.

In response to these challenges, the European Commission proposed amendments to the EU Return Directive and an updated mandate for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency on September 12, 2018. These changes aim to enhance control over the EU's external borders and combat cross-border crime. The agency's capacity has been bolstered, including a plan to create a standing corps of up to 10,000 operational staff and return experts by 2027, along with improved technical resources. It has also been given an expanded mandate to assist Member States with border protection,

return operations, and collaboration with third countries. The proposed new regulations will integrate the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) into the Frontex framework to enhance its effectiveness (Globsec, 2019).

Bilateral Cooperation Agreements are also crucial if it comes to reduce migrant flows and combat human trafficking, the EU-Turkey Agreement was established on March 18, 2016. This agreement aims to halt irregular migration from Turkey to Europe by returning all new irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving on the Greek Islands, whose applications are deemed inadmissible, back to Turkey. Daily crossings have significantly decreased from a peak of 10,000 in October 2015 to an average of 83 today.

In addition, the EU has significantly enhanced its external cooperation on migration and asylum, increasing collaboration with five key African countries—Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal—alongside numerous bilateral agreements with other partner nations (Globsec, 2019).

3. MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON CRIME: INSIGHTS FROM EU

“In the EU context, there appears to be an underlying assumption that immigration can not only be controlled but that it can be perfectly controlled, chiefly through an instrumental use of

the law. The realities suggest, however, that although EU policy may influence migratory movements, it cannot control them, rather merely displacing migrants to take other routes” (Provera, 2015, p. 8).

The European Commission, in both the 2015-2020 Action Plan and its preparations for the new Action Plan, has consistently framed the facilitation of migrant smuggling as a profit-driven, often violent, and highly organized form of crime governed by transnational networks. The Renewed Action Plan continues to rely on simplistic narratives that depict smuggled refugees and migrants as passive victims, creating a misleading dichotomy in which ‘good’ state policies must be enacted to ‘save’ them from ‘bad’ smugglers.

The Renewed Action Plan asserts that the fundamental rights of refugees and other migrants are violated solely by smugglers, overlooking the significant role that state-driven pushbacks and pullbacks play in creating risks. Moreover, the Renewed Action Plan categorizes all consumers of smuggling services as illegitimate asylum seekers, citing their return rates. It claims, without substantiation, that *“two thirds of [irregular migrants reaching the EU] do not meet the criteria for being granted international protection and will eventually need to be returned”* (Arrouche – Fallone – Vosyliūtė, 2021, p. 2). EU policymakers have long portrayed transnational smuggling organizations as the primary drivers of irregular migration, attributing the dangerous journeys and

tragedies faced by refugees and others in transit solely to them, rather than acknowledging that the absence of safe, regular, and orderly migration and asylum pathways is a key factor driving the demand for smuggling services (Arrouche – Fallone – Vosyliūtė, 2021).

This publication takes a step further by also examining the perspectives of EU member states regarding migration and its impact on crime within the EU. It provides valuable data and insights based on evidence from EU countries, along with an exploration of public perceptions. This chapter explores the intricate relationship between crime and migration in the European Union, which is shaped by a range of factors such as socioeconomic conditions, policy measures, and public attitudes. Below lines introduce several key insights into this dynamic and correlations.

In recent years, the number of individuals forcibly displaced around the globe has steadily increased, surpassing 82 million in 2020 (UNHCR, 2021). The flows of international migration have posed various challenges, especially for countries that receive a significant number of refugees. While there is political support in host countries for providing humanitarian aid to these individuals, there are also worries that the influx of refugees may be linked to rising crime rates (Lange – Sommerfeld, 2024).

The connection between immigration and crime is a topic that sparks intense debate among scholars and politicians. This contentious relationship is often discussed in the context of concerns

about safety and security (Ousey – Kubrin, 2018). The number of international migrants has surged in the 21st century, increasing from 173 million in 2000 to nearly 281 million in 2020 (UN, 2021). This issue is particularly relevant in Europe, where a record 1.3 million migrants—primarily from war-torn countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq—sought asylum in 2015 alone (Filzmaier, 2017). The United Nations (2021) also noted that Europe has the highest proportion of intra-regional migration, with nearly 70% of migrants born in Europe living in other European countries. This significant influx of immigrants, combined with a concurrent rise in crime across numerous European nations, has contributed to a widespread belief that immigration may be linked to increased crime rates. According to a Pew Research Study (Connor, 2016), the recent arrival of refugees in Europe has prompted some Europeans to view immigrants with suspicion. The survey found that over 50% of adults in eight of the ten European countries surveyed believed that the influx of refugees heightened the risk of terrorism, while a similar proportion in five of the ten countries believed that refugees would negatively impact the economy by taking jobs and social benefits away from native-born citizens. In Italy, Sweden, and Hungary, over 40% of respondents attributed crime to refugees more than to other groups.

A more recent investigation into immigration and crime in Sweden (Adamson, 2020) revealed that in 2017, nearly **60% of**

criminal suspects were immigrants, and for murder and manslaughter cases, the figure was 73%. The study also noted that the murder rate had quadrupled in recent years as a result of migration. Similarly, a report from the German Federal Police (BKA) indicated that the percentage of suspects increased from 3% in 2014 to 8.5% in 2016. The BKA also reported a 79% rise in crimes committed by immigrants from 2014 to 2015, although these primarily involved nonviolent offenses (Kotkin, 2019).

While concerns regarding the impact of immigration on host countries have largely focused on economic factors current discussions have also begun to explore how migration flows affect the security and well-being of host societies. Consequently, the relationship between immigration and crime has re-emerged as a topic of interest across various social science disciplines (Coccia – Cohn – Kakar, 2024).

Consequently, economic disparities stemming from rising immigration levels may foster feelings of resentment, frustration, and hostility, which can contribute to violent behavior. Individuals experiencing relative deprivation may be prompted to seek compensation, and country-specific variations in the assimilation process can influence the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. The observed connection between immigration and crime in this study may underscore the challenges associated with integrating new immigrants into society. The findings align with

earlier research indicating a significant relationship between income inequality and heightened crime rates. Economic disparities from increased immigration can breed resentment, frustration, and hostility, potentially leading to violent actions. Feelings of relative deprivation may drive *“to seek compensation and satisfaction by all means, including committing crimes against poor and rich individuals”* (Fajnzylber et al., 2002, p. 2).

Concerns surrounding refugee migration to Europe around 2015 were amplified by the demographic characteristics of the refugees, who were largely young, predominantly male, and had lower educational levels—all factors associated with **higher crime rates**. Generally, refugees differ from other migrants in ways that could influence criminal activity. For example, experiences of violence in their home countries may “breed violence” in host countries. Additionally, research indicates that crime rates may rise with immigration if newcomers face bleak labor market prospects. Refugees typically enter the labor market more slowly than other migrants, which may impact criminal behavior.

However, there are also factors that may reduce the likelihood of refugees engaging in crime compared to other migrants. Refugees generally lack the option or incentive for return migration, which can increase their motivation to integrate into their host societies. Therefore, whether crime truly rises as a result of refugee

immigration remains an empirical question (Lange – Sommerfeld, 2024).

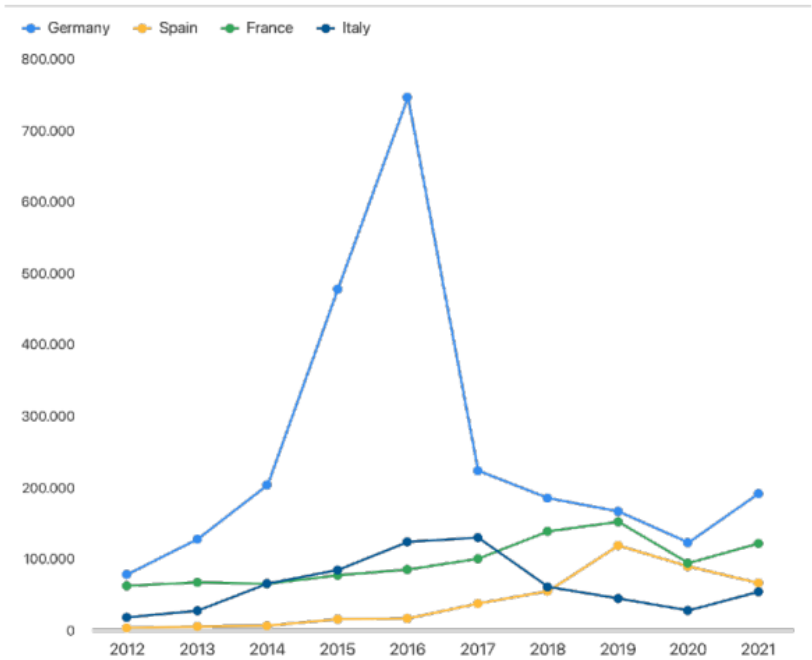
These findings indicate that social policies should prioritize the development and enhancement of programs aimed at providing economic assistance and social support to already existing communities experiencing high levels of immigration and unemployment. Such initiatives could serve as effective strategies for reducing crime and violence. Specifically, economic policies that promote prosperity and address income inequality may alleviate stress and feelings of disadvantage, ultimately contributing to decreased aggression and violent behavior within society (Coccia – Cohn – Kakar, 2024) but it puts a significant burden on state budgets and may result in anti-immigration attitudes and public opinion.

3.1 Perception towards migration in Europe

In the July 2024 Eurobarometer survey regarding EU challenges and priorities, 29% of respondents identified terrorism and security as the fifth most critical issue for the EU to tackle. Similarly, in the European Parliament's Spring 2024 Eurobarometer survey, participants ranked the fight against terrorism and organized crime as the tenth most important topic to be prioritized during the European Parliament election campaign (Luyten, 2024). The number of asylum seekers has risen in all of the major EU countries,

including Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, from 2012 to 2021. Openpolis report claims that “*despite the tendency to criminalise migrants, if we analyse the figures we see that European societies have not become less safe as the foreign share of the population - particularly, asylum seekers, structurally more exposed to irregularity – increased*” (Openpolis, 2022). According to Eurostat (Table 2)– in all of the larger EU countries, the number of asylum seekers has increased Asylum seekers in Germany, France, Italy, and Spain (2012-2021).

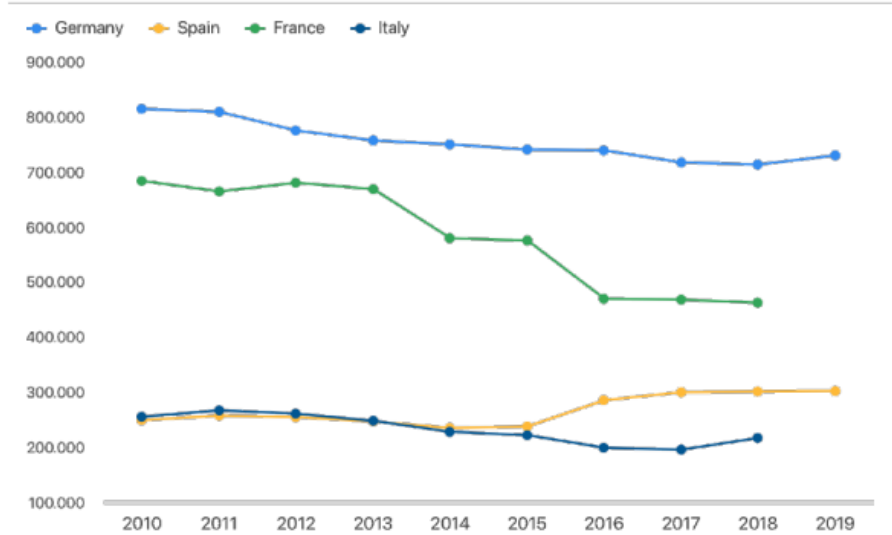
Table 2



Source: Openpolis, 2022

According to Eurostat (Table 3) – criminality is declining in larger EU countries. Convicted people in Italy, France, Germany, and Spain (2010-2019) (Openpolis, 2022). Only in Spain has there been an increase in the number of convicted people between 2010 and 2018 (+20.9%), from about 25 thousand to 30 thousand. In Germany, France, and Italy, on the other hand, there has been a reduction - particularly significant in the case of France (-32.4%).

Table 3



Source: Openpolis, 2022

According to the 2017 Special Eurobarometer 469 report on the "Integration of Immigrants in the European Union", 38% of Europeans believe that immigration from outside the EU poses more of a problem than an opportunity. This figure varies across different European countries. Notably, Hungary, recognized for its anti-immigration stance, has the highest percentage at 63%, whereas Sweden, known for its pro-immigration perspective, has one of the lowest at 19%. This indicates that negative perceptions of migrants persist in certain European nations (Tabaud, 2020; Special Eurobarometer 469, 2018).

A key driver of anti-immigrant attitudes is the perception of threat, which fuels fears that immigrants will adversely affect one's way of life. Sociologists explain this fear through "group-threat theory," which posits that when an out-group (in this case, migrants) enters a country, the in-group (citizens of the host country) often sees them as a threat to their resources due to perceived competition. This perception arises from the anticipation of negative consequences associated with the arrival of migrants, which, in turn, exacerbates anti-immigrant sentiments. Competition may arise over both tangible issues (such as housing and employment) and intangible concerns (like religion and language) (Schlueter – Scheepers, 2010).

Most academic research on opposition to immigration identifies two primary types of threats: realistic threats, which encompass economic and security dimensions, and symbolic threats,

which relate to national identity, cultural values, and potential cultural clashes. The realistic threat component suggests that citizens of host countries view immigrants as economic competitors and potential financial burdens, as well as physical security threats (Tabaud, 2020).

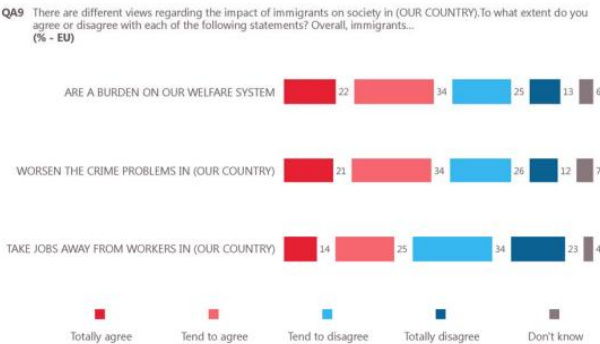
The security aspect of the realistic threat is particularly important when discussing current anti-immigrant sentiments. The fear of terrorism, especially with the presence of ISIS, has significantly heightened concerns about migrants from Middle Eastern countries. A major issue during the migrant crisis was the inadequate management of European borders, which hindered the effective identification of migrants. This mismanagement created the perception that terrorists could easily infiltrate Europe through these migration routes. After the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, these security fears intensified, particularly since one of the attackers reportedly entered Europe disguised as a refugee. Consequently, some people began to conflate immigration with terrorism. Research by Legewie indicates that while the impact of terrorist incidents is profound in the short term, it tends to diminish over time.

In addition to terrorism concerns, immigration is frequently believed to exacerbate crime rates in host countries. As shown the below **Table 1**, more than half of European citizens (55%) agree that immigrants worsen crime problems, over a fifth (21%) totally agreeing and just over a third (34%) tending to agree. Just over a

quarter (26%) tend to disagree, while only just over one in ten (12%) totally disagree with this statement (Special Eurobarometer 469, 2018).

In 20 out of the 28 Member States, at least half (50%) of the respondents believe that **immigrants contribute to crime problems** in their country. In both Portugal and Romania, exactly half (50%) of respondents share this view, while three quarters (75%) of those surveyed in Italy and nearly eight in ten (79%) in Malta agree. Interestingly, Denmark, where attitudes towards immigrants are generally more favorable in other areas, has a significant 73% of respondents who feel that immigrants exacerbate crime issues. Conversely, four countries have a notable number of respondents who disagree with this assertion: Luxembourg (55%), Ireland, France (both at 53%), and Lithuania (51%), where over half of those surveyed do not believe that immigrants worsen crime problems in their nation as visible in **Table 2** (Special Eurobarometer 469, 2018).

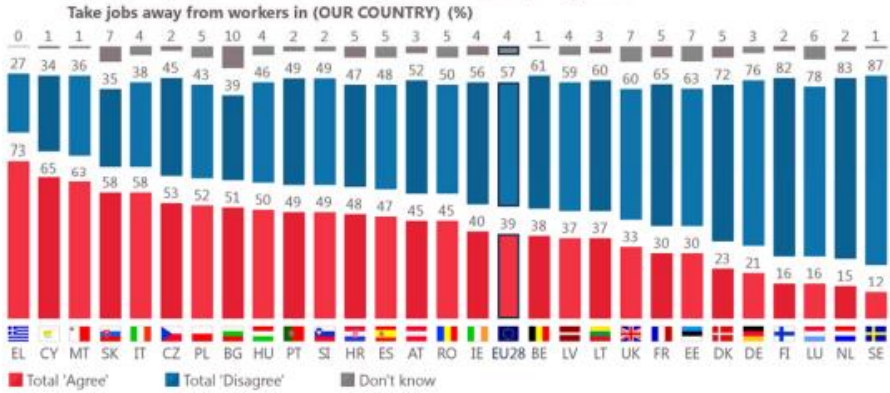
Table 4



Source: Special Eurobarometer 469

Table 5

QA9.3 There are different views regarding the impact of immigrants on society in (OUR COUNTRY). To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Overall, immigrants...



Source: Special Eurobarometer 469

This apprehension is often amplified in the wake of crimes involving migrants, such as the incidents in Germany on New Year's Eve 2015, when immigrant men were accused of assaulting women, which heightened negative sentiments toward immigrants among Germans.

When it comes to making choices between personal security and human rights considerations, many individuals prioritize their safety (Lahav – Courtemanche, 2012).

This holds true in economic scenarios as well. This explains why the only general agreement regarding the New Pact on Migration and Asylum is centered on securing the borders and reducing migrant entry. Anti-immigrant attitudes are driven not only by economic and security issues but also by more abstract concerns

related to national identity, culture, and values. This perceived threat has contributed to the rise of "nativism" in both the U.S. and Europe. Nativism is a philosophical stance, sometimes evolving into a movement, aimed at limiting immigration to preserve essential characteristics of a political entity (Guia, 2016). Though often associated with right-wing parties, nativist sentiments can also be found among leftist groups. Nativism transcends the left/right political divide, manifesting more as a us/them mentality. While this concept predates the migrant crisis, it gained prominence following the turmoil of 2015/2016, fueled by the rhetoric of certain political parties amid fears for national identity (Tabaud, 2020).

Numerous instances of this "symbolic threat" associated with immigration can be observed across Europe. For example, a 2017 survey in France revealed that 72% of the French population believes immigration poses a threat to their way of life. More surprisingly, 48% of respondents subscribed to the "grand remplacement" theory—a conspiracy theory articulated by Renaud Camus in his 2011 book *“Le grand remplacement”*, which asserts that immigration represents a calculated political effort to replace one civilization with another, orchestrated by political, intellectual, and media elites. These figures illustrate that the symbolic threat plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of immigration in France (Tabaud, 2020).

According to a new analysis of the latest German crime statistics conducted by the esteemed ifo Institute, immigrants and refugees do not have a greater propensity to commit crimes, nor is there any correlation between the proportion of immigrants in a district and the local crime rate¹⁷.

The Munich-based institute's study correlated national crime data from 2018 to 2023 with region-specific information to demonstrate that the overrepresentation of immigrants in crime statistics is unrelated to their origins. Migrants often settle in urban areas characterized by higher population density, vibrant nightlife, and a greater number of people in public spaces at all hours. This leads to an overall higher crime rate, with suspects being just as likely to be German as to be from a foreign background. In other words, districts with elevated rates of "immigrant" crime also see higher crime rates among German residents (Knight, 2025).

The study notes that these areas increase the likelihood of residents becoming perpetrators, regardless of nationality, due to factors such as infrastructure, economic conditions, police presence, or population density. An effective way to prevent crime among migrants is through labor market integration. Policies that facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications and distribute asylum seekers based on regional labor demand could help. *“Providing*

¹⁷ ifo Institute , Online: <https://www.ifo.de/en/press-release/2025-02-18/more-foreigners-do-not-increase-germanys-crime-rate>

migrants with faster access to legal earning opportunities would reduce delinquency while also helping to meet labor shortages more effectively,” stated by Alipour¹⁸.

As the migration debate intensifies ahead of German elections, the researchers highlighted other factors contributing to the overrepresentation of immigrants in crime statistics. Immigrants tend to be younger and more often male compared to the general German population; however, the researchers deemed these factors to be less significant in contributing to crime rates (Knight, 2025).

Consequently, anti-immigrant sentiment is a multifaceted issue influenced by various interconnected factors. This article examines the drivers of anti-immigrant attitudes at the group level, though it is also crucial to consider the individual level. Factors such as education, age, and financial difficulties also play a significant role in shaping these views. Additionally, the article includes several graphs to provide an overview of attitudes towards immigrants across European countries. It is essential to emphasize that the results of each survey are influenced by how the survey is conducted – considerations such as the sample size, the formulation of questions, word choice, and the overall context can all impact the findings. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand how anti-immigrant attitudes

¹⁸ ifo Institute , Online: <https://www.ifo.de/en/press-release/2025-02-18/more-foreigners-do-not-increase-germanys-crime-rate>

develop, and a deeper comprehension of this sentiment can assist policymakers in the EU in addressing it effectively.

To address migration-related crime, the EU should prioritize finding solutions for migration itself and advocate for cohesive policies. Based on written above the European Union faces significant challenges in addressing migration effectively, with several factors contributing to these shortcomings. Main challenges in EU Migration Policy are:

1. Lack of Coordinated Approach – the EU's migration policy is characterized by a lack of coordination among member states. This is partly due to the shared competence model, which allows member states to pursue their own policies alongside EU policies, leading to fragmentation and inconsistent implementation¹⁹.

2. Externalization of Migration Management – there is a growing trend towards externalizing migration management by outsourcing asylum processing to non-EU countries. This approach raises ethical, legal, and practical concerns, as it may undermine the rights of asylum seekers and hinder the convergence processes of potential EU candidate countries²⁰. If these factors hinder the implementation of the pact, we could witness a shift towards more hardline positions within each Member State, increased threats to freedom of movement

¹⁹

ECDPM,

Online:

https://ecdpm.org/application/files/1016/5546/8879/ECDPM_ODI_Migration_EU_Policy_2015.pdf

²⁰ Boell, Online: <https://www.boell.de/en/2024/10/15/migration-policy-european-union-increasingly-outsources-responsibility-asylum>

within the Schengen area (as 12 Member States already impose controls at their land borders), and a growing inclination to delegate the processing of asylum seekers to non-EU countries. Beyond the implications for migration itself, such a failure would strongly reflect the EU's political fragility and its difficulties in coordinating responses to common challenges²¹.

3. Short-Term Solutions – the EU often adopts short-term measures in response to migration crises, which fail to address the long-term nature of the problem. This includes relocation schemes and hotspot strategies that have shown limited success in stabilizing the situation²².

4. Public Perception and Political Tensions – migration remains a highly politicized issue, with public perceptions often diverging from reality. This can lead to increased political tensions within and between member states, complicating efforts to implement effective policies²³.

5. Wrong Integration Policies – the EU struggles with providing adequate integration support and incentives for migrants, which can exacerbate social tensions and hinder successful integration²⁴.

²¹ Enriquez C.G., 2024. *The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: context, challenges and limitations*. the Elcano Royal Institute. Online: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-eu-pact-on-migration-and-asylum-context-challenges-and-limitations/>

²² FRA, Oline: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2023/eight-years-eu-asylum-and-migration-progress-and-challenges>

²³ DW, Online: <https://www.dw.com/en/is-migration-the-eus-biggest-challenge-in-2024/a-67859874>

²⁴ FRA, Oline: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2023/eight-years-eu-asylum-and-migration-progress-and-challenges>

CONCLUSION

According to European Parliamentary Research Service the EU collectively encounters associated challenges, including security and safety issues, as well as socio-economic and political repercussions. Irregular migration is not only connected to migrant smuggling and other forms of exploitation targeting already vulnerable individuals, but it also presents a risk of terrorists exploiting irregular migration routes to enter the EU covertly. Additionally, significant inflows of irregular migrants can strain asylum and social welfare systems, complicate integration efforts, and potentially lead to anti-democratic and discriminatory behaviors.

In its roadmap for the EU to combat organized crime, the Commission has underscored the significance of crime prevention, as well as the need for an effective EU legal framework addressing organized crime. It has proposed enhancing both the framework and its implementation. Future assessments should focus specifically on: harmonized legal definitions of organized crime and deterrent penalties; ensuring authorities have access to suitable special investigative techniques; considering additional measures such as national organized crime strategies and specialized units drawing on multidisciplinary expertise to address complex investigations; facilitating the collaboration of crown witnesses at the EU level; and

implementing measures to restrict members of criminal networks from accessing the EU's internal market.

To enhance its approach to migration, the European Union should concentrate on several key areas. First, the EU needs to develop a more cohesive and coordinated policy framework that reconciles national interests with overarching EU-wide objectives. This alignment is crucial for creating a unified strategy that benefits all member states. Second, it is essential to implement long-term solutions that not only address the root causes of migration but also improve integration policies for those who arrive in Europe. By targeting the fundamental issues that compel individuals to migrate, the EU can help reduce pressure on its borders while fostering a more inclusive environment for migrants. Third, the EU must strengthen its partnerships with countries of origin and transit. By enhancing international cooperation, the EU can improve migration management practices while ensuring that human rights are protected and respected throughout the process.

Finally, addressing public perceptions of migration is critical. Promoting a more nuanced and informed public discourse can help alleviate political tensions surrounding the issue. By encouraging evidence-based policy-making, the EU can foster a more supportive environment for migration-related initiatives and policies. In summary, by focusing on these areas, the EU can significantly

improve its migration strategies, ensuring they are effective, humane, and sustainable.

The primary criticisms of the EU's approach to migration and crime highlight several significant issues. One major concern is the presence of ineffective and fragmented policies. The EU's migration policies have faced criticism for their lack of cohesion and effectiveness. Despite initiatives such as the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, there is still inadequate coordination among member states, resulting in inconsistent implementation and results. The core of this criticism lies in the EU's struggle to balance effective migration management with the protection of human rights and the encouragement of integration.

Moreover, the EU has primarily adopted what is known as the "administrative approach." This strategy employs a range of administrative measures designed to prevent organized crime from permeating the public sector, economy, and critical areas of public administration. Preventing this kind of infiltration is equally vital as tackling organized crime through the criminal justice system. While some EU member states are making notable progress in implementing this new approach, others are only beginning to consider it. This means that the level of coordination among EU states is insufficient, especially during times of crisis.

The main criticism regarding the EU's failure to address migration and crime is its lack of developing an effective and

comprehensive migration policy. The EU has been accused of not addressing irregular migration, hence creating disparate approaches from member countries. This disparate approach can be used to justify security concerns as some argue it gives room for criminal networks to thrive, like human trafficking and smuggling.

Besides, the EU's asylum and border management policies are not sufficient to respond to increasing migrant numbers, and they have established humanitarian crises and increased social tensions between member states. Others hold the view that the EU has not been successful in addressing the underlying causes of migration, such as war and economic instability in the migrants' countries of origin, thus not developing an all-encompassing plan that finds a balance between humanitarian responsibilities and public security.

In its seventh progress report on the implementation of the EU Security Union Strategy, the Commission recognized that the geopolitical, economic, and security landscape within the EU and its neighboring regions has undergone significant and lasting changes. The current risks we confront are "very different" from those that prevailed when the Security Union Strategy was first adopted. The report highlights the rise of cybercrime, the increasing dependence of our societies and economies on information and communication networks and connected devices, instability in the EU's neighborhoods, new hybrid threats, the potential misuse of emerging technologies like AI by criminals, and an escalated threat to stability

posed by organized crime. Consequently, the fight against organized crime will continue to be a priority on the EU's agenda in the coming years. While not all risks can be eradicated, the Commission believes that vulnerabilities can be effectively addressed (Luyten, 2024). If it comes to correlation between migration and crime – despite extensive research into the immigration-crime link, findings often yield conflicting results. Many researchers now challenge the notion that rising immigration correlates with increased violence. Instead, recent studies indicate that both legal and undocumented immigration are more likely associated with lower crime rates or show no significant relationship with crime due to lack of empirical evidence (Coccia – Cohn – Kakar, 2024).

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