



Mass illegal border crossings, terrorist threat, humanitarian and health crises, increasing organised crime, hybrid threats, temporarily closed internal borders: the challenges of the last decade, mainly security-related, have had a significant impact on the Schengen external borders and the internal life of the region. In response to these challenges, the fight against irregular migration has permeated the renewal of the European Union's rules, policy strategies, external action and partnership policies on immigration, asylum and border management. As a reaction to the changing security environment, the Schengen Borders Code [(EU) 2016/399], which contains the tasks of the external border surveillance, has been amended several times, most recently in June 2024, to enhance the resilience of the borders [(EU) 2024/1717].

The management and protection of the EU's external borders is primarily a national competence, but the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has a key role to play in this area within the framework of the European Integrated Border Management (EIBM) [(EU) 2019/1896]. In addition, since 2016, Europol has also been increasingly involved in the fight against cross-border migrant smuggling, with a framework applicable until 2025 set out in the renewed Action Plan against migrant smuggling [COM(2021) 591 final].

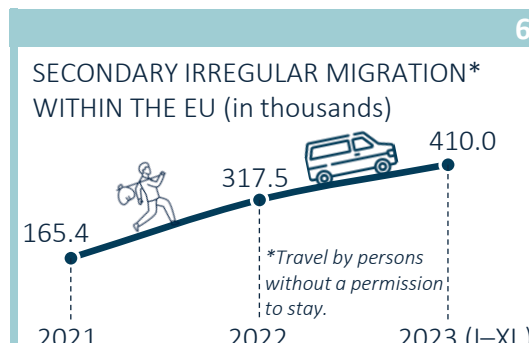
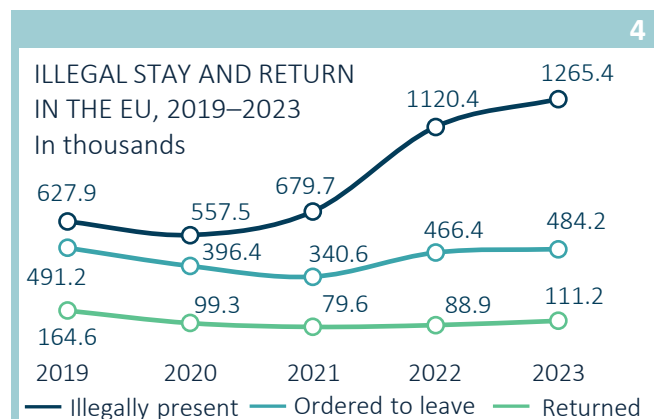
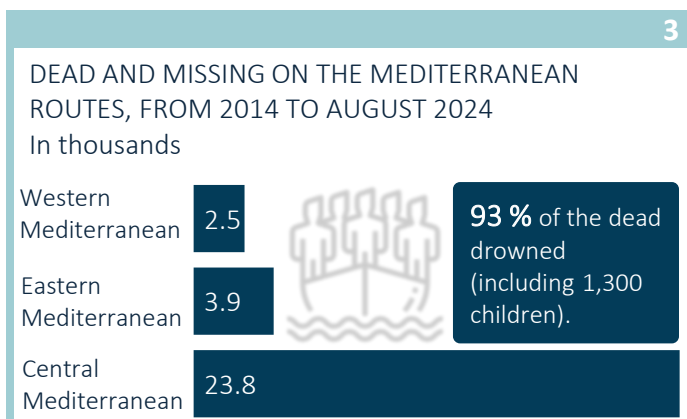
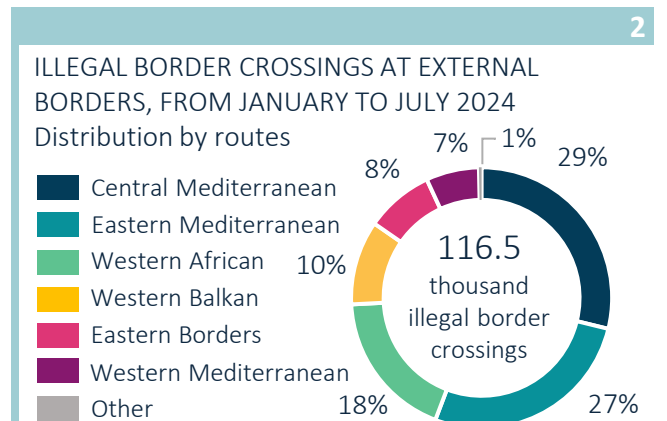
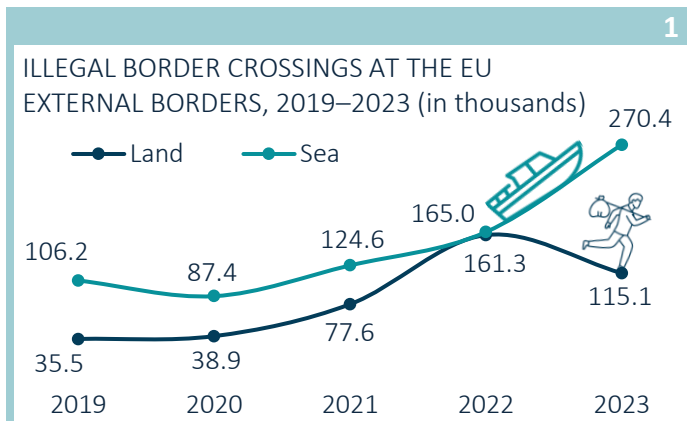
Trafficking in human beings – the crime of facilitating illegal entry and stay – is embedded in a broad context of international serious and organised crime. It poses a significant security threat to the irregular migrants who use it, to the countries of destination and to the European Union. According to Europol's analysis (2024), smuggling networks:

- are mostly also active in other serious crime areas;
- have a high level of adaptability;
- exploit geopolitical, economic, environmental and social crises;
- cooperate intensively with criminal networks inside and outside the EU;
- use, if necessary, extended violence against irregular migrants, law enforcement agencies or competing criminal networks;
- adapt quickly to new digital technologies.

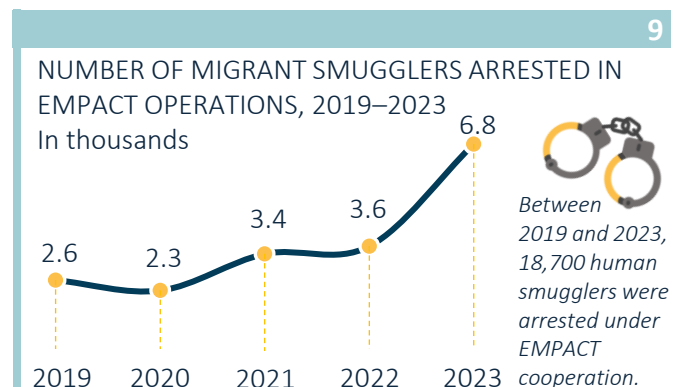
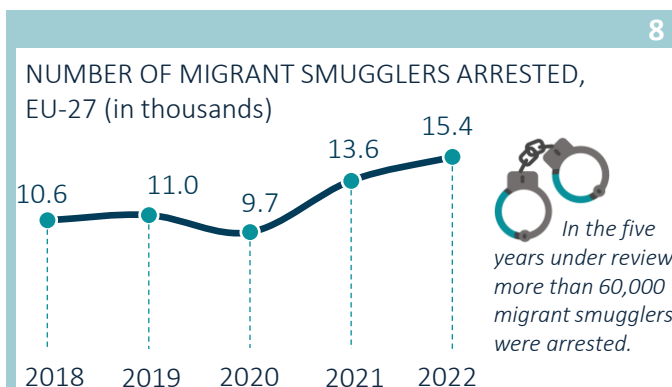
Europol (2024) also points out that migrant smuggling can be linked to terrorism and trafficking in human beings, which further increases the security threat to the EU.

The fight against human trafficking has been a top priority for the EU for decades. At a time of an unprecedented wave of migration in Europe, the European Commission has set out the way forward in the fight against migrant smuggling, initially in the European Agenda on Migration [COM(2015) 240 final] and then in the Action Plan against migrant smuggling for 2015-2020 [COM(2015) 285 final]. As a result, Europol's mandate and tasks were extended in 2016 [(EU) 2016/794], and Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre was established to support Member States' law enforcement authorities through information sharing, analysis and forecasting, coordination and capacity building. Migrant smuggling has been included in the priorities of EU policy cycle for organised and serious international crime in both 2015 and 2021 (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats, EMPACT) (8665/21). The Commission has also published a renewed action plan against migrant smuggling in 2021 [COM(2021) 591 final], and in 2022 and 2023, it developed specific action plans for each migratory route (European Commission, 2023).

The external dimension of the fight against migrant smuggling is a key part of the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum [COM(2024) 251 final]. However, according to the State of Schengen report the police cooperation and the legislative environment also need to be improved due to increased migrant smuggling into and within the EU and the rise of cross-border crime [COM(2024) 173 final]. The Commission has therefore published a new legislative package in 2023 and launched a Call to Action for a Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling. In support of these objectives, the European Council called for a strengthening of the EU's overall toolbox (EUCO 1/23; 7/24; 15/24). The first proposal of the package [COM(2023) 754 final] aims, among others, to enhance Europol and police cooperation, the negotiating mandate for which was agreed by Member States' representatives in 2024 (Council of the EU, 2024). ♦



More than **90 %** of irregular migrants arriving in the European Union use the services of human trafficking networks.



SOURCES

- 1 | 2 Frontex: [Detections of illegal border-crossings statistics](#) | 3 IOM: [Missing migrants project](#) | 4 Eurostat: [[migr_eipre](#)]; [[migr_eiord](#)]; [[migr_eirtn](#)] [[migr_eirfs](#)] | 5 Eurostat: [[migr_eipre](#)] | 6 Frontex: [ARA, 2023](#); [Annual Brief, 2023](#) | 7 Europol: [Facilitation of Illegal Immigration](#) | 8 Frontex: [ARA, 2023](#) | 9 EMPACT results: [2019](#), [2020](#), [2021](#), [2022](#), [2023](#)