



Press Release

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Increased exchange of data would help the fight against migrant smuggling

Europol, the European Union's law enforcement cooperation agency, supports EU Member States in combating migrant smuggling. Part of this role involves serving as an information exchange hub. However, Europol faces continuous challenges in gaining access to all relevant criminal databases, and in making full use of external information sources. This is the conclusion of a special report by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) that calls for improvements to the way data exchange works, particularly to achieve full interoperability between databases.

"Migrant smuggling has posed a major humanitarian and security challenge for the EU in recent years," said Bettina Jakobsen, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. *"Europol is a valued partner to Member States in their fight against migrant smuggling. As an information exchange hub, Europol needs to have access to and systematically use all relevant data sources, but this is not currently the case. We hope that our audit will influence the ongoing review of the Europol Regulation."*

Europol estimates that around 90 % of those who cross the EU borders irregularly are assisted by migrant smugglers, mostly criminal groups also involved in other crime areas, such as document fraud or human trafficking. However, law enforcement activities to fight migrant smuggling are the responsibility of the Member States. Europol serves as a coordination and information exchange hub. The value of this service depends largely on how actively Europol's partners exchange information with it. The auditors note varying degrees of engagement among Member States, and sometimes incomplete data.

Europol has been affected by problems in negotiating international agreements with priority non-EU countries to gain access to operational data from criminal investigations in countries of origin and transit. It has been unable to directly collect and analyse information from private parties to perform its tasks, and makes no systematic use, or no use at all, of external data sources such as the Visa Information System and the Passenger Name Record (PNR). Europol has also had issues in

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is available at eca.europa.eu.

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exchanging data with other EU agencies. The auditors particularly recommend that Europol enhances its cooperation with Frontex through mutual data exchange, and with Eurojust through indirect database access. Finally, using innovative IT processes, such as data mining and artificial intelligence, for data processing and exchange among partners would also help. Up to now, Europol has not used any of these tools. A planned overhaul of its overall IT infrastructure will provide an opportunity to do so.

In terms of performance, the auditors note that Europol's partners value the strategic and operational support it provides, but there is no overall measurement of Europol's results in terms of combating migrant smuggling. Some procedures are also not sufficiently structured; for instance, prioritising criteria to allocate resources where they are needed most.

Background information

The main piece of EU legislation on migrant smuggling is the "Facilitation Directive"; however, each Member State uses its own definition of what constitutes migrant smuggling. Europol does not have executive powers and cannot arrest criminals.

Special report 19/2021: *"Europol support to fight migrant smuggling: a valued partner, but insufficient use of data sources and result measurement"* is available on the [ECA website](#).

Recently, the ECA issued reports on [readmission cooperation with non-EU countries](#) and on [Frontex's performance](#).

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