

MODUS OPERANDI AND TRENDS OF HIGH-RISK CRIMINAL NETWORKS FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION OPERATING IN REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

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Abstract: The manuscript aims to explore and represent the currently exploited trends and strategies of organized criminal groups active in the Republic of Bulgaria, involved in smuggling of illegal migrants across Europe as part of a larger high-risk criminal networks. It details the prevailing trends and specific mechanisms employed in these criminal activities over the past three years, relying on a methodology of data analysis from different text sources and the professional experience of the author.

The topic of the paper is researched from the perspectives of criminology, law enforcement, and intelligence.

The study identifies five key findings as primary factors—the geo-social factor, the local factor, the foreign factor, the factor of criminal and non-criminal actors, and the geopolitical factor—that influence the characteristics of criminal groups engaged in illegal immigration, as observed in Bulgaria.

These factors offer insights for enhancing operational and strategic responses to counter emerging threats posed by high-risk criminal networks of illegal immigration.

The research emphasizes the different organizational levels and operational functions of these criminal groups and their networks. It examines specific patterns of criminal activity over the past three years, including the roles of illegal migrants, their drivers, guides, field captains, middlemen, and the leaders of the criminal organizations.

Keywords: illegal immigration, terrorism, modus operandi, trends, Bulgaria, organized criminal groups, high-risk criminal networks, migrant smuggling

INTRODUCTION

Illegal immigration has become one of the most prevalent and profitable criminal activities in recent years (Eurostat, 2023). The progression and escalation of this crime type are influenced by various factors, including international relations and geopolitical conflicts, the rising demand for this criminal service, and the broader effects of globalization.

The nature of illegal immigration operates as an organized structure. This form of crime is typically carried out by highly structured networks comprising international and national channels, with individuals at various levels possessing specialized roles. For instance, certain individuals may facilitate connections with illegal immigrants and their groups, while others serve as drivers, navigators, boat operators, or provide hidden accommodations. Often, a single person may assume multiple roles within the scheme. At the top of the pyramid are the organizers, who command and control the other levels. A crucial requirement for each organized crime group involved in illegal

immigration networks, as relevant to our current study, is bilingual capability. Each operating channel requires individuals who speak both the language of the host country or another international language, as well as the language of those attempting to transit through.

Those at the top of the pyramid provide essential connections, funding, logistical support, and human resources to various branches within the network. They coordinate the operations among different branches and establish links with partner countries where other organized criminal groups are involved. These groups may operate in a decentralized manner, functioning independently within the country or across its different regions, or they may be part of a larger, centralized criminal network operating across multiple countries. Organized criminal groups work similarly to independent service providers within a free market, responding to demand from different groups of illegal migrants. The services offered depend on the capacity of the specific organized crime group within the broader network and on the financial resources of the migrants who engage them.

The combination of multiple organized criminal groups forms extensive criminal networks. These networks sometimes develop through accidental or random associations, while in other cases, they are intentionally orchestrated by key actors across various branches and countries.

This high-risk factor directly impacts national security, as the demand among illegal migrants attempting to cross borders increases, and funds flow rapidly. These funds are frequently used to corrupt government officials, finance additional criminal activities, and support foreign fighters or radicalized individuals with violent or terrorist intentions. These individuals can travel and integrate into mainland European societies, potentially operating as sleeper cells or engaging in disruptive actions.

Some organized crime groups and networks channel their funds into private companies or even government institutions with the express purpose of fostering corruption or gaining unethical advantages over legally established companies. Numerous cases have shown that legal business infrastructures, such as car rental firms, are often created specifically to facilitate illegal activities, including migrant smuggling. Compromising government officials, law enforcement, and other personnel undermines the state's national security. Cases of such involvement are frequently driven by economic incentives (Mediapool, 2023).

Recent FRONTEX report identifies the Western Balkan route as the second most active migratory pathway into the European Union (Frontex, 2024), followed closely by the Eastern Mediterranean route. Bulgaria's geographic location places it at the intersection of these routes, positioning the country as a central player on the Balkan Peninsula. This strategic factor emphasizes the significance of Bulgaria's experience in combating illegal immigration. These circumstances underscore the relevance of this research and the urgent nature of the issues addressed.

METHODOLOGY AND KEY TERMS

The methodology for this research relies on qualitative data analyses on a diverse array of open-source information, including books, online articles, academic articles, news articles, other textual materials and the

personal professional experience of the author. Additionally, the view of the author are influenced by uncited classified sources with varying levels of security clearance according to the Bulgarian Classified Information Act, ranging from "For Official Use Only" to "Confidential" and "Secret." Off course, this data is not presented in the current article and its involvement is purely of the analytical aspect and quality of the author.

This mixed-methods approach, combining open-source and classified information, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The use of publicly available sources ensures transparency, while the specific of the professional involvement of the author provides insights otherwise inaccessible in open domains. The covered period of the research is focused in the last three years and it represents the current trends in this type of criminal activity and schemes involved for practicing it.

This approach above combines the benefits of open access with the depth of classified insights, allowing for a robust analysis. On the positive side, it expands the informational foundation of the research, enhancing reliability where open-source data alone may be insufficient. However, this methodology also introduces limitations related to confidentiality requirements which exclude citation and must be trusted to the views of the author itself.

For the purposes of this paper, we will use the United Nations definition of an organized criminal group/henceforth OCG/ - *"a group of three or more individuals that is not spontaneous, accidentally formed, exists for a period of time and acts to perform at least one punishable by law crime for a period of more than four years, with the purpose of obtaining, directly or indirectly, financial or other material advantage."*/United Nations, 2024/

As for high-risk criminal network we will use the definition provided by EUROPOL – *" high-risk criminal network is an organized group engaged in serious and often transnational criminal activities that pose a significant threat to public safety and security. These networks are characterized by their agility, borderless operations, controlling structures, and destructive methods. High-risk criminal networks typically have a hierarchical structure with strong leadership that can coordinate activities across multiple jurisdictions"* /Europol, 2024/

For logical simplification we can conclude that two or more OCG can form a criminal network, as they boost their criminal impact in the society and multiply their unlawful force projection.

Modus operandi is a distinctive method or pattern of behavior that a criminal or group of criminals employs when committing crimes. The term translates from latin as "method of operating"/Britannica, 2024/.

THE GEO-SOCIAL FACTOR

As previously noted, the geographical significance of the Republic of Bulgaria is essential within the Balkan Peninsula. The country's location underscores its importance as a gateway to mainland Europe, which remains the primary destination for illegal migrants. These processes are not new and are historically recognized, tracing back to the old "Silk Road" and Bulgaria's role as the "gateway to Asia" through the Bosphorus Strait.

This context highlights the Bulgarian-Turkish border as a critical hotspot for both law enforcement and illegal migrants. Known as the Strandzha-Sakar region, this area comprises the Strandzha and Sakar mountains,

which span the entire Turkish border. While the region has some flat areas, it is predominantly rugged with highlands and mountainous terrain. Such geography presents a formidable challenge for the enforcement forces tasked with detaining and arresting those who attempt to cross undetected. The principles here mirror those of military operations in mountainous terrain, where conventional forces counteract guerrilla tactics.

Organized crime groups exploit several modus operandi to maximize the terrain's advantages when attempting to bypass the country's first line of defense. This defense primarily comprises border police, the gendarmerie, and various army units acting in a policing capacity.

1. Exploiting various land-navigation tactics through specialized software or open-source mobile apps. In this modus operandi, illegal migrants enter the country independently until they connect with a designated driver who transports them further inland. Numerous well-established routes are shared among groups, with one group often passing information on to the next. The model represents a typical mountain pass shared between one group that has already passed to another. In almost all cases, migrants use their mobile phones offline or with VPN data.

In this scenario, experienced members of the criminal networks instruct migrants in military-style evasion tactics, advising them to "walk by night and rest by day," "use valleys for cover," "avoid exposing themselves on high ground," and "remove any traces of their presence." These instructions help them navigate covertly and minimize detection.

As migrant groups move through the border region alone, one or more members often stay in contact with a non-Bulgarian national (typically another migrant, a Turkish citizen, or someone from outside Europe) who coordinates the next steps with the local contacts—either Bulgarian nationals or others already within the country. These contacts arrange transport and shelter until the group can move toward other borders, usually Serbia or Romania. Crossings sometimes occur without a prior arrangement with an established network, as migrants can often secure transportation on arrival in Bulgaria. However, last-minute logistical failures sometimes force a change in drivers. This part of the journey typically lasts several days.

This modus operandi is highly risky, and there are frequent cases of migrants losing their lives at this stage. Often, this method is chosen by those without significant financial resources, while groups with more substantial funding opt for the next, safer and faster modus operandi.

2. When the group is not alone, they employ similar tactics but with the assistance of a guide, or "coyote." The guide is familiar with the terrain, including both secure and vulnerable areas, and can provide additional cover or handle emergencies if pursued by border forces. Guides may be Bulgarian nationals, Turkish citizens, or migrants from non-EU countries. The guide's role includes connecting the group with the next unit in the chain—the drivers. It is not uncommon for locals in the Strandzha-Sakar region or abandoned buildings to be used as temporary shelters, which makes the border crossing more secure and manageable, especially for groups with women and children.

In some cases, specialized groups of guides enter the country illegally to familiarize themselves with the terrain under the guidance of experienced instructors. Once trained, they can serve as coyotes for future migrant groups. On both sides of the border, specialized individuals (Bulgarian or non-Bulgarian nationals) are skilled at navigating the challenging Strandzha-Sakar terrain.

Breaching border defenses is not technically difficult; simple tools like pliers or ladders, sometimes combined with a blanket, are often sufficient for the task. The rest of the country is divided by a significant mountain range. Most organized crime groups use the “south route,” but there are instances of the “north route” being used as well, with various route combinations possible. To fully address these border crossing methods, a third *modus operandi* must also be mentioned:

3. Crossing through official border checkpoints. The methods employed here are varied and numerous. Migrants may be hidden in trucks, cars, buses, or any other conceivable vehicle to pass undetected. Although some truck drivers claim ignorance of their passengers, a significant number are aware. In one case, migrants used the driver’s password-protected Wi-Fi network while hiding between the truck’s wheels, despite the driver’s claim that he was unaware of their presence. Such situations are difficult to prosecute, as proving the driver’s criminal intent is challenging when the migrants are concealed outside the truck cabin. Analyzing in detail this aspect can be put in different article because it can be made into an entirely different study, as the same can be said for the other *modus operandi* too.

When examining the geographical factor within the country and how its terrain is exploited, nearly all “inner courses”—routes that transport illegal migrants from one location to another after the initial border crossing—follow a similar model:

- A *lead vehicle*, typically with a driver, takes the first position and commands the other vehicles involved in the transport. Sometimes, this lead vehicle includes a driver and a “Field captain.” In either case, the lead vehicle’s role is to scout for law enforcement and alert the main vehicle to any potential police presence or hazards along the route. The lead vehicle also maintains contact with higher-ranking members of the criminal organization and navigates the route to the final offloading destination.

- The *primary vehicle* carries the migrants and a driver who communicates with the lead vehicle and follows a predetermined route coordinated between them.

- Occasionally, a *back vehicle/support* is deployed, serving a similar role to the lead vehicle as a rear reconnaissance vehicle, protecting against police interception. The field captain may also be positioned in this rear vehicle, as it offers the safest position for escape in the event of a police intervention or arrest.



Figure №1: Modus operandi of vehicle deployment in migrant smuggling. A comprehensive model illustrating the tactical deployment of vehicles in smuggling operations. While this model presents a complex arrangement, it can be adapted or simplified according to the available resources and specific operational requirements of the crime group. The spatial distribution between vehicles may vary from several meters to temporal intervals of 5 to 15 minutes.

It is important to note that 2022 was a tragic year for law enforcement in Bulgaria, marking the darkest record since data collection began in 1942. Over five Bulgarian police officers lost their lives, most while conducting operations to counter illegal immigration. Police pursuits have surged as many drivers transporting illegal migrants within the country and in border regions attempt to evade police checks, often driving dangerously in hopes of escaping arrest if they can abandon the vehicle with the migrants inside.

In summary, organized crime groups operating in Bulgaria have developed significant expertise in traversing mountainous terrain and providing in-depth logistical support, such as coordinated vehicle convoys. These groups exploit the mountainous border regions, either by using guides or, at times, by leaving migrants to navigate the area on their own, directing them to points where designated vehicles await to transport them to hiding spots or across other borders.

Sometimes, routes are planned directly from point A to point B along main roads and highways; other times, they are routed along secondary roads, away from major transport arteries where police presence and checkpoints are more concentrated.

This expertise has expanded to support other inter-country networks for migrant smuggling across the Western Balkans, where organized Bulgarian criminal groups operate primarily to provide aggressive driving and logistical transport services.

Social dynamics also align with the country's geographical realities. The most sought-after asset by leaders of organized crime networks is drivers. The most skilled drivers often become field captains, and those who excel may advance to roles as recruiters or coordinators, acting as middle man with minimal contact with the migrants. This distance provides greater security, as it follows the principle: "The farther you are from the migrants, the safer you are from authorities."

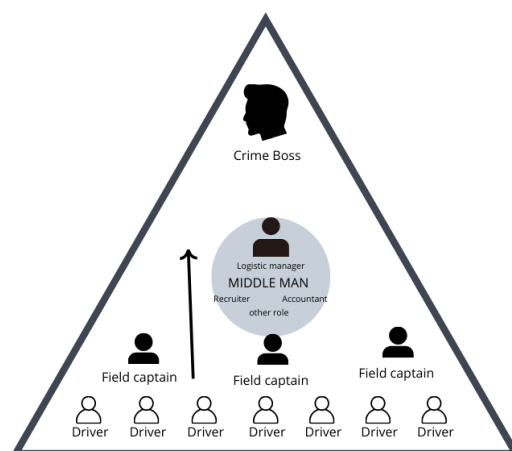


Figure №2: Potential career development cycle of an illegal immigrant driver in an organized crime group.

Bulgaria remains the poorest country in the European Union (BNT, 2023). The financial incentives in these criminal schemes are substantial, often yielding “easy money” for just a few hours of work. A typical route, transporting migrants from the Turkish border to the capital or from the capital to the Romanian or Serbian border, takes about five to seven hours.

Factors such as ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, or possession of a driver’s license are irrelevant; anyone who can drive and is willing to participate is recruited by criminal networks. While there are varied examples, the typical driver profile is that of a middle-aged man with a low socio-economic background or a gambling addiction, often a Bulgarian national or from a former Soviet sphere of influence country.

A significant pool of drivers over recent years has come from drug-user communities. These drivers are often among the most aggressive, frequently attempting to evade police both in vehicles and on foot if they manage to flee from a car chase. Numerous cases show drivers under the influence of methamphetamines, ecstasy, or other stimulants, which provide adrenaline rushes and heightened alertness during transport.

There is considerable overlap between drug-dealing circles and organized criminal groups (OCGs) involved in migrant smuggling. Drug dealers and users, constantly in need of money and familiar with illegal activities, often exhibit a high degree of criminal resilience, making them willing participants in migrant smuggling operations. Their existing criminal networks also facilitate this transition; when a low-level drug dealer is recruited by an OCG for migrant smuggling, they often bring in their own contacts. This dual engagement serves both the financial demands of drug users and dealers and the profitability of migrant trafficking.

When a person from a community with social vulnerabilities—such as gambling or drug addiction—is recruited and completes one or more profitable trips as a migrant driver, they can quickly become a “local star.” The quick money earned acts as a social magnet, attracting others within these communities who wish to achieve rapid financial gain. This creates a form of local “infection,” turning neighborhoods, small villages, drug-user communities, or gambling groups into valuable recruitment pools for OCGs and criminal networks.

In conclusion, from a social perspective, the high-risk segments of criminalization of the society remain the primary recruitment targets for OCGs due to the low skill requirements for the easily replaceable role of drivers. On the other hand, more specialized roles—such as coyotes/guides, those who offer hiding places, and boatmen—demand specific skills and thus receive considerable investment and protection from criminal networks. However, for the common driver role, almost anyone is considered suitable.

This article does not aim to examine every role and specific function within OCGs and migrant smuggling networks, as a comprehensive analysis would require a much larger-scale study, which is beyond the scope of this work.

THE LOCAL FACTOR

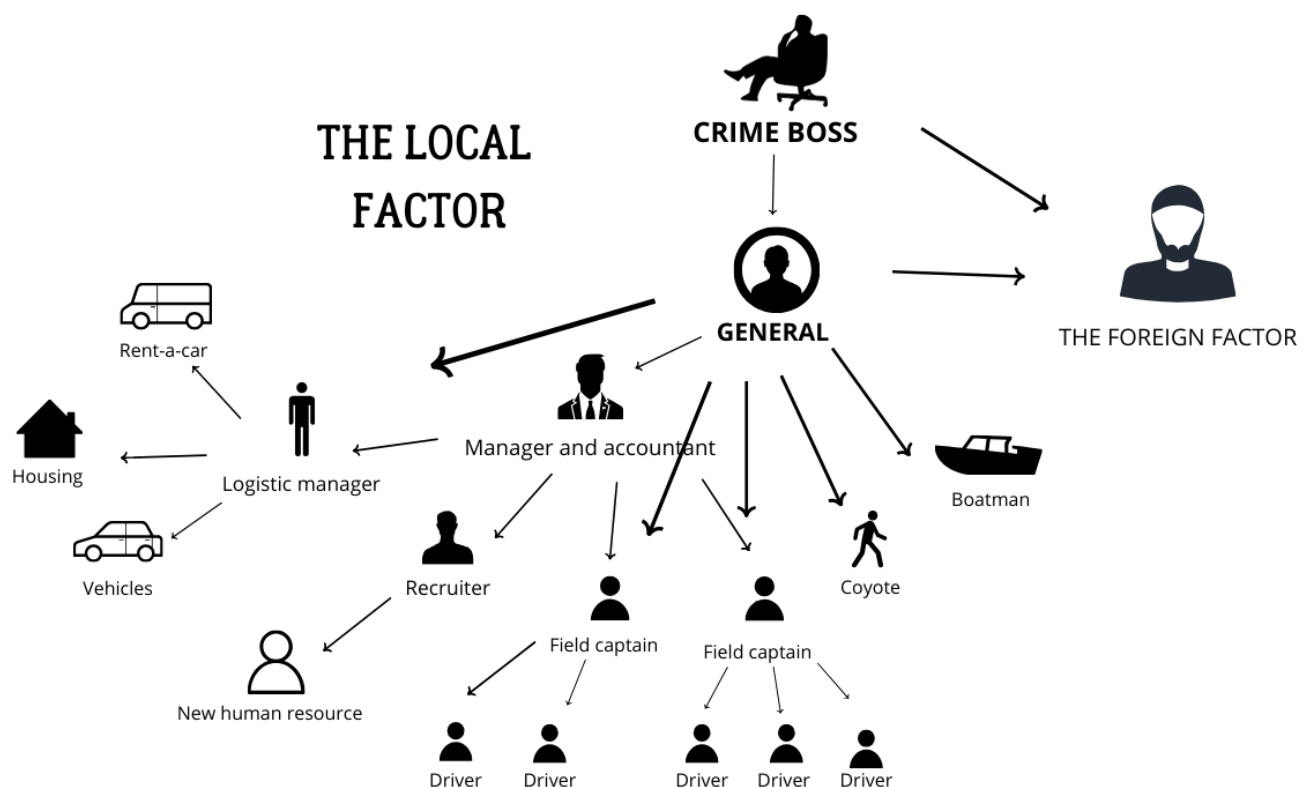
For the purposes of this research, the term *local factor* refers to the criminal infrastructure established and exploited within the host country of illegal immigrants. Although this infrastructure may be initiated or influenced by foreign entities, it is nonetheless developed, maintained, and utilized in the host country. By *criminal infrastructure*, we refer to all the various roles and positions necessary to successfully coordinate border crossings, provide temporary shelter, and manage domestic transport, moving migrants from one border or safe house to another.

The local factor in the host country oversees every stage of the transition process within its borders: (1) Receiving migrants and either aiding their passage through border control or bypassing it illegally upon entry; (2) Transporting them undetected and illegally across domestic routes from one key location to another; (3) Providing temporary shelter between transport stages while preparing for the next border crossing; and (4) Ensuring their delivery to the exit border of the host country.

The local factor operates independently from the foreign network that maintains direct contact and coordination with the migrants themselves. It is important to distinguish that the local factor primarily provides a service to the criminal network. In this context, the local factor comprises nationals of the host country, such as Bulgarians, Romanians, or other Europeans. Meanwhile, the foreigners who handle the migrants, manage finances, and oversee the broader organizational structure are the ones who directly communicate with the migrants, often speaking their language and understanding their needs. In this study, these foreigners will be referred to as the *foreign factor*. The foreign factor supplies funding, ensures service quality, and depends on the local factor's assistance in return for a financial reward.

Figure №3: Schematic representation of the *local factor* model. Hierarchical structure wherein a single crime boss may oversee multiple generals while simultaneously managing various criminal branches beyond migrant smuggling, like for example, a drug trafficking operation.

If we consider an example, the *local factor* in Bulgaria is primarily operated by Bulgarian organized criminal groups (OCGs), which are often part of broader international criminal networks. However, in some cases there are OCG entirely from Romanians and Moldavians/or other nationals/, who function as entirely local entities, managing the entire cycle of illegal border transitions—from entry at the Turkish or Greek borders, to hosting migrants within the country, and ultimately delivering them to the Romanian or Serbian borders. This approach has a



straightforward rationale: the fewer people involved in the operation, the fewer individuals among whom profits must be divided. Bulgarian OCGs use similar strategies abroad, including in countries like Austria, where they aim

to operate independently to maximize financial gain and reduce the risk of external exposure. Similarly, there are cases of Bulgarian OCGs independently operating in Greece.

In other cases, the *local factor* is a hybrid structure involving both Bulgarian and international participants. For example, drivers may be nationals of Romania, Albania, Kosovo, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, or other post-Soviet countries with low economic status. Meanwhile, those issuing commands and providing locations for illegal migrants are typically Bulgarians. Similarly, hosts offering shelter or boatmen facilitating border crossings may also be Bulgarian or Romanian nationals. These individuals maintain direct communication with the segment of the network responsible for managing contact with the migrants and their families.

The *modus operandi* of the *local factor* within the host country's criminal infrastructure can be categorized into three primary operational models:

1. **Entirely Domestic Local Factor:** The *local factor* consists exclusively of citizens from the host country. In this scenario, the organized criminal group (OCG) is established, developed, and operated entirely within the host country.
2. **Mixed Local Factor:** The *local factor* is a collaboration between citizens of the host country and international partners from other nations. In this case, the OCG is international, incorporating diverse origins and spheres of influence.
3. **Foreign-Only Local Factor:** The *local factor* is composed entirely of foreign nationals, with no direct ties to the host country. This model represents an external force imported specifically to execute particular tasks or directives issued by the *foreign factor*.

In the context of the Republic of Bulgaria and its unique geographical features, we can identify the primary roles required within the *local factor* to support both the illegal immigrants and the *foreign factor* representing them. It is important to note that this representation is a logical framework—roles may overlap, or one individual may fulfill multiple responsibilities. Nevertheless, each role carries distinct responsibilities critical to ensuring the successful transition of illegal immigrants through the host country:

1. **Leader/Crime Boss** – This individual serves as the mastermind and decision-maker of the organized crime group (OCG). They oversee all roles and branches within the organization and act as the primary representative in the broader criminal network. The Leader maintains contact with other OCGs for collaboration and coordinates with illegal immigration channels at a high level, often interacting with other chiefs or bosses. To minimize risk, they stay far removed from lower-level operatives and avoid direct contact with the illegal immigrants. The Leader (crime boss) may also oversee multiple criminal sectors, such as migrant smuggling and drug trafficking.
2. **CEO/General** – Operating as a key intermediary, the CEO or General directly manages the operatives working in the field. They liaise with the foreign representatives connected to the illegal immigrants, often requiring bilingual skills to communicate effectively. Their responsibilities include sharing precise locations of illegal immigrants with drivers or guides (coyotes), ensuring the local factor can efficiently begin the transport

process. Additionally, they monitor the actions of OCG members working directly with the immigrants to ensure operations run smoothly.

3. **Manager, Accountant, and Recruiter** – This trusted individual often rises through the ranks, starting as a driver or guide(coyote). He is responsible for recruiting new operatives, managing funds, and providing logistical support such as vehicles, radios, and communication devices. His role is essential for maintaining operational efficiency and addressing logistical challenges.

4. **Logistical Manager** – This individual oversees the vehicles and safe houses used during the illegal operations. They may own legal businesses, such as a rent a car company or properties, and claim plausible deniability about their involvement in illegal activities. By leveraging legitimate assets, they support the smuggling network while reducing personal risk.

5. **Sole Recruiter** – Often a field captain or driver, the recruiter focuses on enlisting low-profile members for the OCG. If specialized roles are required, such as hosts, logistical managers, or boatmen, recruitment is handled at a higher level within the organization.

6. **Field Captain** – Acting as the on-ground leader, the field captain ensures orders from the CEO/General are executed during transport operations. They oversee the OCG's activities, address issues as they arise, and uphold professional conduct during interactions with illegal immigrants.

7. **Drivers** – This category includes:

- **7.1. Main Vehicle Driver:** Responsible for directly transporting the illegal immigrants. This is the most undesirable role due to its high likelihood of legal repercussions.

- **7.2. Pilot/Lead Vehicle Driver:** Operates ahead of the main vehicle, scouting for police checkpoints and ensuring a clear path.

- **7.3. Rear Vehicle Driver:** Provides rear support to the convoy, maintaining surveillance and intervening if police attempt to disrupt the operation.

8. **Boatman** – This highly specialized role involves transporting illegal immigrants across water borders, such as the Danube River in Bulgaria. Boatmen are valuable assets due to their skill set and are challenging to replace.

9. **Guide/Coyote** – These individuals facilitate land navigation for illegal immigrants, particularly across heavily guarded and difficult terrains like the Bulgaria-Turkey border. Their expertise in navigating mountainous and forested areas, often under the cover of night, is critical for successful border crossings.

In conclusion for this paragraph, the models of the local factor presented here are broad generalizations. In practice, organized crime groups (OCGs) often collaborate, collectively forming the complete local factor. Roles within these groups are fluid and may shift depending on the situation, the availability of resources, the movement of criminals, and the specific demands of the foreign factor. The significance of this discussion lies in understanding that every host country is subject to the criminal infrastructure and influence of multiple OCGs. These groups collectively shape the larger criminal network. Furthermore, a single OCG may extend its operations across multiple host countries, establishing and maintaining local criminal infrastructure in each. This interconnected structure highlights the transnational nature of these networks and their ability to adapt and operate effectively across borders.

THE FOREIGN FACTOR

As previously mentioned, the foreign factor represents the organizational aspect of criminal networks that functions entirely within the context of illegal immigrants and their supportive communities—mainly citizens from countries outside the European Union. This factor includes individuals who are culturally, ethnically, and familially connected to the illegal immigrants. These individuals may range from legal citizens with dual citizenship in host countries to second- or third-generation immigrants, refugees with humanitarian status, or those undergoing legal status procedures.

The foreign factor forms a distinct microclimate of relationships. This microclimate embodies the continuous search and demand for logistical and transport services. It also reflects the dynamic interactions between illegal immigrants and legal refugees, as well as a series of events that unfold both within and outside the host countries.

In most cases involving illegal immigrants transiting through Bulgaria, these individuals already have an established diaspora, friends, or family waiting for them in Central and Western Europe. On the other end of the channel, they maintain connections with family members or relatives still residing in their home countries. These individuals often come from nations such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Palestine (ECRE, 2024), but also include individuals from Morocco, Libya, Sri Lanka, and other Central Asian countries.

In the model of the foreign factor, a two-component system ensures the safe passage of illegal immigrants through migrant smuggling channels. The primary element that guarantees their safety is **money**. Typically, the funds are supplied by family members in the immigrants' home countries, while friends and relatives in the host or destination countries provide the necessary criminal contacts and connections.

It is important to note that, for illegal immigrants, this type of criminal activity is often not seen as morally reprehensible. Many individuals within their networks provide help—such as information or connections—without expecting financial compensation. The monetary factor becomes critical when services are required, especially when the foreign factor interacts with the local factor in various host countries.

This activity has given rise to specialized networks involving individuals, often foreign citizens in host countries, who have established strong, trustworthy connections with organized criminal groups (OCGs) from high-risk criminal environments. These individuals act as facilitators, linking the demands of the foreign factor with the logistical capabilities of the local factor. They are capable of arranging services such as transportation, temporary accommodations, and ad hoc solutions for illegal immigrants either attempting to cross borders or already present in host countries.

The financial transactions supporting this system often rely on the well-documented “**HAWALA**” method (FATF, 2022). In this model, third-party guarantors hold the funds until the agreed-upon service is completed. Once the service is verified, the money is released to the criminal actor facilitating the operation.

In Bulgaria, current cases reveal that criminals representing the local factor frequently use **video verification** to confirm the safe delivery of illegal immigrants. Typically, low-level operatives or field captains record

a video at the final destination, showing all the immigrants alive and well. This footage serves as evidence for the guarantor, who then authorizes the release of the funds. Once released, the money is transferred to the criminals involved in the local factor's operations, completing the transactional cycle.

If we are to describe the roles within the foreign factor, the following model emerges:

1. **Head Connection** - This individual is typically a refugee—whether documented or not—or a professional criminal native to countries in the Middle East, North Africa, or Central Asia. They operate within the current host country where the illegal immigrants are transiting. The head connection maintains reliable relationships with various organized criminal groups (OCGs), their representatives, and leaders. Additionally, they maintain contact with groups of illegal immigrants or foreign factor agents in countries where immigrants are being hosted. Their primary responsibility is to secure clients for the local factor by leveraging their network of trust. An essential skill for this role is the ability to communicate in at least one language spoken by the local factor's representatives.

2. **Middle Connections** - Subordinates of the head connection, these individuals act as intermediaries between the head connection and either OCG representatives within the local factor or groups of illegal immigrants. Their responsibilities include ensuring that OCGs in need of clients (illegal immigrants) connect with immigrants seeking their services. They play a crucial role in maintaining the flow and support at each stage of the criminal network. For instance, in Bulgaria, head connections with strong ties to high-risk local OCGs often rely on middle connections in Turkey who consistently supply them with clients for their criminal "tour operations."

3. **Accountant** - This role involves managing the financial aspects of the operation. The accountant oversees the transfer of funds from illegal immigrants, which can originate from their personal bank accounts, cryptocurrency wallets, or third-party representatives linked to family members in their home countries or relatives in Central and Western Europe.

4. **Driver or Host** - In certain cases, the foreign factor may attempt to function as the local factor. There have been instances where illegal immigrants or citizens from non-EU third countries take on responsibilities independently, managing the entire process themselves. These roles are similar to those in the local factor, involving tasks like providing accommodation for hiding illegal immigrants or transporting them between locations.

As mentioned earlier, the roles within these models are often interchangeable, with individuals performing multiple functions depending on the situation. The foreign factor primarily represents **service seekers**, while the local factor serves as **service providers** within the overall criminal network.

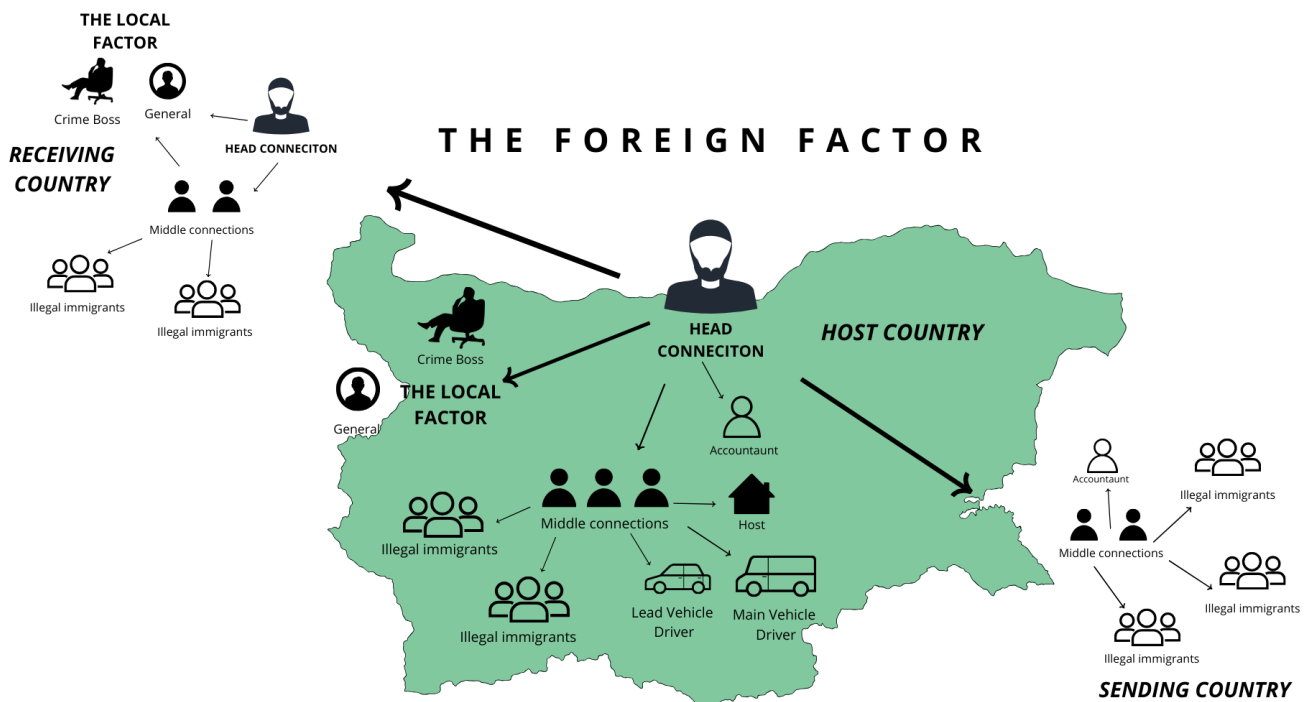


Figure №4: Schematic representation of the foreign factor model. The provision of transport and hosting services is optional and not typically the responsibility of the foreign factor. These tasks are generally undertaken by the local factor, while the foreign factor primarily ensures a consistent supply of illegal immigrants to sustain the criminal network chain.

In conclusion, the foreign factor often comprises individuals who are well-established within the host country. Some of these individuals operate legal businesses that indirectly or directly support the roles within the criminal networks. Their involvement can vary, but they frequently facilitate the gathering and movement of illegal immigrants or refugees.

In non-EU countries, such as Turkey, similar hubs exist. However, in these locations, the gatherings typically attract individuals with well-established connections to criminal groups operating in Bulgaria. These hubs act as critical nodes in the network, bridging the foreign factor with local factors in host countries.

The internet also plays a significant role in facilitating these operations. Online platforms provide a continuous and accessible avenue for establishing contact with head connections or middlemen based in Bulgaria. These intermediaries can easily connect potential clients with organized criminal groups (OCGs) specializing in migrant smuggling, effectively extending the reach and efficiency of these illicit networks.

THE FACTOR OF CRIMINAL AND NON-CRIMINAL ACTORS

Throughout this manuscript, we have referred to legal activities and entities—such as rent-a-car companies, non-European foreign nationals with legitimate businesses, government institutions, and law enforcement personnel—that become directly or indirectly involved in the crime of migrant smuggling. In this section, we analyze the role of these non-criminal actors and their cooperation with the criminal factors described earlier.

It is essential to recognize that illegal immigration is a multifactorial phenomenon. Even the smallest aspect of this crime on a larger scale requires some form of collaboration between two or more individuals. Unlike crimes such as burglary, assault, or drug dealing, migrant smuggling inherently connects various spheres of society with the criminal underworld. This interconnectedness highlights the significant threat that illegal immigration poses to national security.

Below are examples and an analysis of different **modus operandi** and their actors within the Republic of Bulgaria. The list remains dynamic and adaptable, reflecting the evolving tactics of high-risk criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling:

Rent-a-Car Companies

Rent-a-car companies play a pivotal logistical role in migrant smuggling operations, particularly at the national level. When private vehicles or buses are used, they are easier to trace, prompting organized crime groups (OCGs) to adapt by frequently using rental cars and buses. Over time, this has fostered a growing collaboration between the private sector and law enforcement agencies.

However, not all rent-a-car companies comply with law enforcement efforts. Many continue to support criminal activities by neglecting to scrutinize their clients or their travel records. In some cases, rent-a-car companies are purposefully established as legal entities to serve criminal networks, providing a steady supply of untraceable vehicles for smugglers.

This tactic is critical to the OCGs' operations because, when drivers transporting illegal immigrants are apprehended, the vehicles—and their connections to the companies—often remain undetected. Frequently, even the drivers themselves are unaware that they are using vehicles tied to front companies established by the OCGs.

Fictional Owners and Proxy Users

Another tactic involves individuals of low socio-economic status who are used as proxy owners of multiple cars, phone numbers, private companies, or even properties. These individuals are offered small financial incentives to register assets in their names, which are then exploited for criminal activities.

For example:

- **Vehicles:** Cars may be purchased or transferred under the proxy owners' names to avoid direct connections to the OCGs. These vehicles are then used in smuggling operations.
- **Phone Numbers:** Mobile numbers linked to key figures in the criminal network are often registered to these proxy owners, creating a layer of anonymity and breaking the chain of traceability to the actual operators.
- **Companies:** Shell companies established in the names of proxy owners serve as legal facades to launder money or provide logistical support, such as renting properties or vehicles for smuggling activities.

By leveraging these fictional or proxy owners, criminal networks effectively obscure their operations and shield themselves from direct accountability.

Food and Drink Establishments

Certain food and drink establishments, particularly those owned by non-Europeans (the "foreign factor"), often become hotspots for meetings and establishing connections. Illegal immigrants or their intermediaries can easily find criminal contacts in well-known venues run by individuals from Turkey or other non-EU countries.

It is crucial to note that this observation is not a generalized judgment against all non-European foreigners in Bulgaria. However, as previously discussed, many refugees or individuals fleeing war or poverty do not feel a moral obligation to adhere to Bulgarian laws. Often, the services provided at such establishments are perceived as favors to help someone in need. In some cases, intermediaries at these locations accept financial incentives for facilitating these connections.

TIR and Truck Parking Spots

Truck parking spots, where TIR vehicles (large cargo trucks) are hosted, sometimes serve as hubs for the exchange of illegal immigrants between different truck drivers. This can occur with or without the knowledge of the parking lot owners.

Within the trucking community, such parking spots are also centers for exchanging information about corrupted firms or drivers willing to participate in smuggling operations. This phenomenon is particularly notable in parking spots owned by Turkish nationals or individuals from other non-European backgrounds, where connections between drivers and organized crime groups may be established.

Non-Europeans with High Social Status

Non-Europeans with prominent social or economic standing in their communities often play complex roles in these activities. As respected leaders, they may feel a moral or social obligation to support migrant smuggling, seeing it as a form of altruism or as a way to bolster their reputation within their communities.

In some cases, these individuals face significant pressure from their minority groups to assist refugees in need. However, others exploit this situation for personal financial gain, leveraging their status to facilitate smuggling operations while enhancing their social or economic position.

Political Party Representatives, Government Employees, and Law Enforcement Personnel

These groups are categorized together due to their ability to exploit state power and influence to support or participate in migrant smuggling activities. Corruption among state officials is typically driven by financial incentives, although other factors such as social or political pressures may also play a role.

An illustrative example involves representatives from a foreign embassy who were caught transporting illegal immigrants. Notably, this embassy was not from one of the Arab states, emphasizing that corruption and involvement in smuggling activities are not confined to specific regions or cultures.

Places of Worship

Places of worship often serve as natural gathering points for refugees and illegal immigrants. These locations provide an environment where individuals in similar or related circumstances can connect. Frequently, they also facilitate interactions between various actors of the foreign factor or representatives of the local factor.

Such places are sometimes used as a camouflage, allowing illegal immigrants to blend with legal residents and avoid detection. Due to the sensitive nature of law enforcement operations near religious sites, these areas are often perceived as safe zones from police checks or interventions. This complicates the efforts of law enforcement to disrupt the criminal networks exploiting these spaces.

Volunteer and Paramilitary Groups

Volunteer and paramilitary groups also play a significant role in the dynamics of migrant smuggling in Bulgaria. On one end of the spectrum, organizations like **Foundation "Mission Wings"** (FMW, 2024) operate independently in the Bulgarian-Turkish border region to provide humanitarian assistance to illegal immigrants. While their intentions may be altruistic, their actions can inadvertently support illegal migration, creating challenges for law enforcement and border control.

On the other end are paramilitary groups and self-organized volunteers that pose a direct threat to national security. For example:

- **Paramilitary organizations** have been observed operating in the region, often with the stated aim of protecting national borders. However, their unregulated actions have been accused of mistreating illegal immigrants and undermining the authority of government forces (BNT, 2022).
- **Volunteer groups led by convicted criminals**, who use their public ambitions to gain influence, have also been reported (RFE, 2021). These groups have been accused of taking matters into their own hands, further complicating border security and enforcement efforts.

The dual pressures faced by the government are substantial. On one side, law enforcement must contain and manage paramilitary groups attempting to assert authority in the region. On the other, they must address the continuous influx of illegal immigrants who seek to exploit the border region's vulnerabilities and establish connections with local criminal actors.

In conclusion to this paragraph, it highlights the symbiosis between strategically significant resources, locations, and non-criminal spheres of business and social life, which are often exploited by criminal networks. Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) capitalize on these naturally available opportunities or deliberately create them to gain an advantage in their high-risk criminal activities. This relationship between the legal and illegal spheres illustrates the complexity and adaptability of criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling.

THE GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR

When we look beyond the hot zones in the Republic of Bulgaria or the high-risk criminal networks operating across the Balkan peninsula to profit from criminal activities such as smuggling people from North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, a distinct pattern begins to emerge. This pattern is evident from recent terrorist attacks in Europe connected to illegal immigrants (BBC, 2024) and various confidential intelligence reports that, while classified, reflect observations obtained through efforts to gather information from illegal immigrants detained in Bulgaria.

The same patterns and conclusions are echoed in the 2023 Europol public report on terrorism, which clearly underscores the link between illegal immigration and its significance to the national security of states. Terrorist organizations and lone-wolf radicals exploit the resources of organized criminal groups to infiltrate European nations covertly. The strategic importance of the Republic of Bulgaria as a geopolitical factor and a primary entry point to Europe is emphasized in the following citation:

"In August 2022, a Moroccan foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) was arrested in Spain and another Moroccan FTF was arrested in Austria before being extradited to Spain. They had travelled together, entering the EU irregularly from Türkiye, passing through Bulgaria and the Western Balkan route." (Europol, 2023)

The conventional criminal networks that facilitate international crime are exploited by foreign actors with malicious intentions. Through the pathways these criminal sectors create into our countries and societies, terrorist organizations and groups infiltrate, establish footholds, and carry out operations. Illegal immigration—defined in criminal terms as migrant smuggling—goes beyond being a criminal activity with significant financial and social repercussions for law-abiding citizens and their way of life. It also represents a direct and life-threatening challenge to national stability. Migrant smuggling has become an emerging tool and strategic asset in the arsenal of our geopolitical rivals and adversaries, who seek to destabilize and undermine our individual and collective national security.

To underscore the significance of this factor with objectivity rather than prejudice, it is essential to highlight the direct correlation between criminal involvement and radicalization, particularly in the form of terrorist activities

(Colomina, P., France, O., Saverot, D., 2017), especially within the younger immigrant population (Bergen, P., 2017; Todorov, V., 2015). The psychology underlying individual cases of radicalization and criminalization among such individuals is not a novel phenomenon. Some fall into the cycle of violence and lawlessness simply due to an inability to adapt effectively to the values and lifestyles of the modern Western world. Rather than becoming constructive members of society who could reap the benefits of peace, prosperity, and stability, they are alienated, becoming marginalized—creating a fertile ground for both terror and criminality (Madzharov, E., 2017). For others, their paths are shaped by personal histories or connections, such as the loss of family members, ties to individuals within terrorist organizations, or lifelong exposure to criminal or extremist environments that ultimately define their paths (Madzharov, E.; Andonova-Tsvetanova, Y., 2020).

The psychological factors that influence criminal and terrorist behaviors are strikingly similar, as are the methods of operation employed by organized criminal groups and terrorist networks in their development, establishment, and recruitment processes (Atanasov, A., 2022). A number of illegal immigrants entering Bulgaria carry their past experiences and histories, deeply ingrained in their identities. Substantial intelligence information exists regarding individuals who were actively engaged in combat, including ex-soldiers and veterans from foreign armies or militias. The reintegration of combat veterans from developed countries into society already poses a significant challenge; adapting combatants from different cultural backgrounds presents an even greater difficulty, even in the absence of malicious or terrorist intentions.

The geopolitical implications of this phenomenon are highly significant, even for the illegal immigrants themselves. This importance is reflected in the symbolic terms and names used in their online communities or anonymous profiles, such as "The Road of the Martyrs" or "The Village of the Martyrs" (referring to Edirne, Turkey).

The convergence of all these factors illustrates the challenge posed by the geopolitical dimension to the European continent. Over time, the accumulation of various criminal elements and terrorist threats evolves into a substantial challenge to the national security of the European Union and each individual member state, ultimately influencing Europe's strategic and geopolitical standing on the world stage and shaping its perception among global rivals.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive examination of the complex mechanisms, trends, and structures underpinning organized criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling in Bulgaria, a key transit country in Europe.

This research underscores five critical factors shaping these criminal operations: geo-social, local, foreign, criminal/non-criminal actors, and geopolitical influences. Each of these factors contributes to the adaptability and effectiveness of these networks in exploiting geographical, economic, and social vulnerabilities. The analysis of their **modus operandi** reveals sophisticated strategies, including the use of the terrain, coordinated vehicle convoys, and clandestine logistical hubs, which enable the seamless movement of illegal migrants. Furthermore,

the networks display a dynamic integration of local and foreign actors, with a hierarchy that efficiently balances leadership, operational roles, and financial systems.

Key conclusions include:

1. **Geo-Social Factor:** Bulgaria's strategic geographical location places it at the nexus of major migratory routes, such as the Western Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean pathways, making it a critical gateway for illegal migration into Europe. This factor, combined with its socio-political dynamics, including economic vulnerabilities and proximity to conflict regions, provides fertile ground for organized criminal networks to thrive.
2. **Local and Foreign Factors:** A seamless collaboration between domestic criminal infrastructures and foreign agents ensures the continuity of smuggling routes. The local factor facilitates transit and shelter, while the foreign factor coordinates funding and migrant flow.
3. **Criminal and Non-Criminal Actors:** Criminal groups exploit legitimate enterprises, such as car rental services and local businesses, and sometimes rely on corrupt officials. This nexus between legality and illegality complicates law enforcement efforts.
4. **Geopolitical Implications:** The interconnection between illegal immigration and national security threats is evident in the infiltration of radicalized individuals and terrorist networks via these routes, further emphasizing the strategic importance of Bulgaria in European border security.

This study highlights the need for multifaceted strategies to combat these high-risk criminal networks. Enhanced international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and targeted operational measures are essential. Furthermore, addressing socio-economic disparities that fuel recruitment into these networks, alongside stricter regulatory oversight of vulnerable sectors, is critical.

In conclusion, the integration of criminological, policing, and intelligence frameworks offers a robust foundation to counter the evolving tactics of organized criminal networks. As Bulgaria continues to be a critical point of illegal migration, its experiences and strategies can inform broader European policies aimed at dismantling these illicit structures and safeguarding the pathway to Europe.

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