Modi operandi and trends of high-risk criminal networks for illegal immigration operating in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This article aims to explore and represent the currently exploited trends and strategies of organised crime groups active in Bulgaria and involved in the smuggling of illegal migrants across Europe as part of a larger high-risk criminal network. 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 of 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 primary factors – the geosocial 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 emphasises the different organisational 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 and middlemen and the leaders of the criminal organisations.

Keywords: illegal immigration, terrorism, modus operandi, trends, Bulgaria, organised crime 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 globalisation.

Illegal immigration operates as an organised structure. This form of crime is typically carried out by highly structured networks comprising international and national channels, with individuals at various levels occupying specialised roles. For instance, certain individuals may facilitate connections with illegal immigrants and their groups, while others serve as drivers, navigators or 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 organisers, who command and control the other levels. A crucial requirement for each organised crime group (OCG) involved in illegal immigration networks, as relevant to the current study, is bilingual capability. Each operating channel requires individuals who speak both the language of the host country or another international language and 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 OCGs are involved. These groups may operate in a decentralised manner, functioning independently within the country or across its different regions, or they may be part of a larger, centralised criminal network operating across multiple countries. OCGs 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 OCG within the broader network and on the financial resources of the migrants who engage them.

The combination of multiple OCGs 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 have the potential to corrupt government officials, finance additional criminal activities and support foreign fighters or radicalised individuals with violent or terrorist intentions. These individuals can exploit the opportunity of the illegal network to travel and integrate into mainland European societies, potentially operating as sleeper cells or engaging in disruptive activities.

Some OCGs and criminal 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).

A recent report by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) 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 geographical location places it at the intersection of these routes, positioning the country as a central player on the Balkan peninsula. This strategic factor emphasises 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 to be addressed.

Methodology and key terms

The methodology behind this research relies on qualitative data analysis of a diverse array of open-source information, including books, online articles, academic articles, news articles and other textual materials, along with the personal professional experience of the author.

The author's professional background in law enforcement provides contextual familiarity with the operational environment of migrant-smuggling networks. However, all analytical conclusions presented in this paper are derived exclusively from the open, verifiable sources cited in the references. Professional experience informs the interpretive framework but does not substitute for, or supplement, the cited evidence base.

This mixed-methods approach, combining open-source information and professional law enforcement expertise, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The use of publicly available sources ensures transparency, while the specifics of the author's professional involvement provide insights otherwise inaccessible in open domains. The covered period of the research focuses on the last three years and represents the current trends in this type of criminal activity and the schemes involved in carrying it out.

Analytical scope and evidentiary basis

All analytical conclusions presented in this paper are derived exclusively from open, publicly verifiable sources cited in the references, including reports from the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) (2023, 2024), Frontex (2024), the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) (2022) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2004). The author's professional experience in law enforcement provides contextual familiarity with the operational environment but serves solely as interpretive background – not as evidentiary support for any specific claims. Where professional context informs analytical framing, this is explicitly noted. No classified, confidential or otherwise non-citable material has been used as the basis for conclusions presented herein.

This approach combines the benefits of open access with the depth of analytical operational experience, 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 inherent to experience-informed analysis, where certain contextual interpretations reflect the author's professional judgement as an expert analyst with an operational background.

For the purposes of this paper, we will use the United Nations definition of an 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' (UNODC, 2024).

As for 'high-risk criminal network', we will use the definition provided by Europol: 'A high-risk criminal network is an organised group engaged in serious and often transnational criminal activities that pose a significant threat to public safety and security. These networks are characterised 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 OCGs can form a criminal network, as they boost their criminal impact on society and multiply their unlawful force projection. Modus operandi is a distinctive method or pattern of behaviour that a criminal or group of criminals employs when committing crimes. The term translates from Latin as 'method of operating' (Britannica Editors, 2024).

The geosocial factor

As previously noted, the geographical significance 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 recognised, 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.

OCGs exploit several modi operandi to maximise the terrain's advantages when attempting to bypass the country's first line of defence. This defence primarily comprises border police, the gendarmerie and various army units acting in a policing capacity.

1. **Exploiting various land-navigation tactics through specialised software or open-source mobile applications.** 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 through and another. In almost all cases, migrants use their mobile phones offline or with VPN (virtual private network) data.

In this scenario, criminal networks employ terrain-exploitation guidance methods to facilitate covert border crossings. These methods, consistent with patterns identified in Frontex operational reports (Frontex, 2024), involve instructing migrants on movement timing, terrain selection and counter-detection practices that can maximise the geographical advantages described above.

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 towards other borders, usually Romania or Serbia. 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 the houses of locals in the Strandzha–Sakar region, or abandoned buildings, to be used as temporary shelters, which makes border crossing more secure and manageable, especially for groups with women and children.

In some cases, specialised groups of guides enter the country illegally to familiarise 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, specialised individuals (Bulgarian or non-Bulgarian nationals) are skilled at navigating the challenging Strandzha–Sakar terrain.

Breaching border defences is not technically difficult in terms of overcoming the static border fence wall and can be done using military-style tactics with conventional user-grade tools that can be acquired from a standard commercial shop. The rest of the country is divided by a significant mountain range. Most OCGs 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's cabin. Analysing this aspect in detail merits an entirely separate study – and, by extension, a different article – and the same can be said for the other modi operandi.

When examining the country's geographical features 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 organisation and navigates the route to the final offloading destination.

- A **main vehicle** carries the migrants and a driver who communicates with the lead vehicle and follows a predetermined route coordinated between them.
- Occasionally, a **rear or support vehicle** is deployed, serving a similar role to the lead vehicle as a rear reconnaissance unit, 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 3.1. Modus operandi of vehicle deployment in migrant smuggling
NB: This figure shows a comprehensive model illustrating the tactical deployment of vehicles in smuggling operations. While the 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, OCGs 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 Bulgarian OCGs operate primarily to provide aggressive driving and logistical transport services.

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

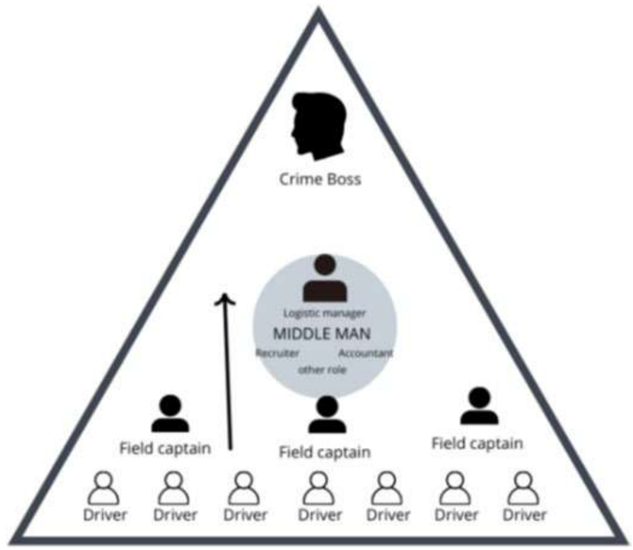

Figure 3.2. Potential career development pyramid of an illegal immigrant driver in an OCG

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 licence 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 socioeconomic status or a gambling addiction, often a Bulgarian national or a national of a country in the former Soviet sphere of influence.

A notable proportion of apprehended drivers have been associated with drug-user communities, as reported in Bulgarian enforcement operations and media coverage (Mediapool, 2023). These drivers are often among the most aggressive in evading police. Documented cases include drivers operating under the influence of methamphetamines, ecstasy or other stimulants, which may contribute to risk-taking behaviour during transport.

Europol’s analysis of high-risk criminal networks documents instances where poly-criminal actors operate across multiple crime types, including drug trafficking and migrant smuggling (Europol, 2024). This pattern suggests potential overlap between drug-related criminal circles and migrant-smuggling operations, though the extent of such convergence varies by region and network structure.

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 easy 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 neighbourhoods, 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 criminalisation of 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 specialised 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 can be 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 utilised 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 transit process within its borders: (1) receiving migrants and either aiding their passage through border control or bypassing it illegally upon entry; (2) transporting migrants undetected along 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 migrants' delivery to the exit border of the host country.

The local factor operates independently of 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 are the non-Europeans who handle the migrants, manage finances and oversee the broader organisational structure and 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.

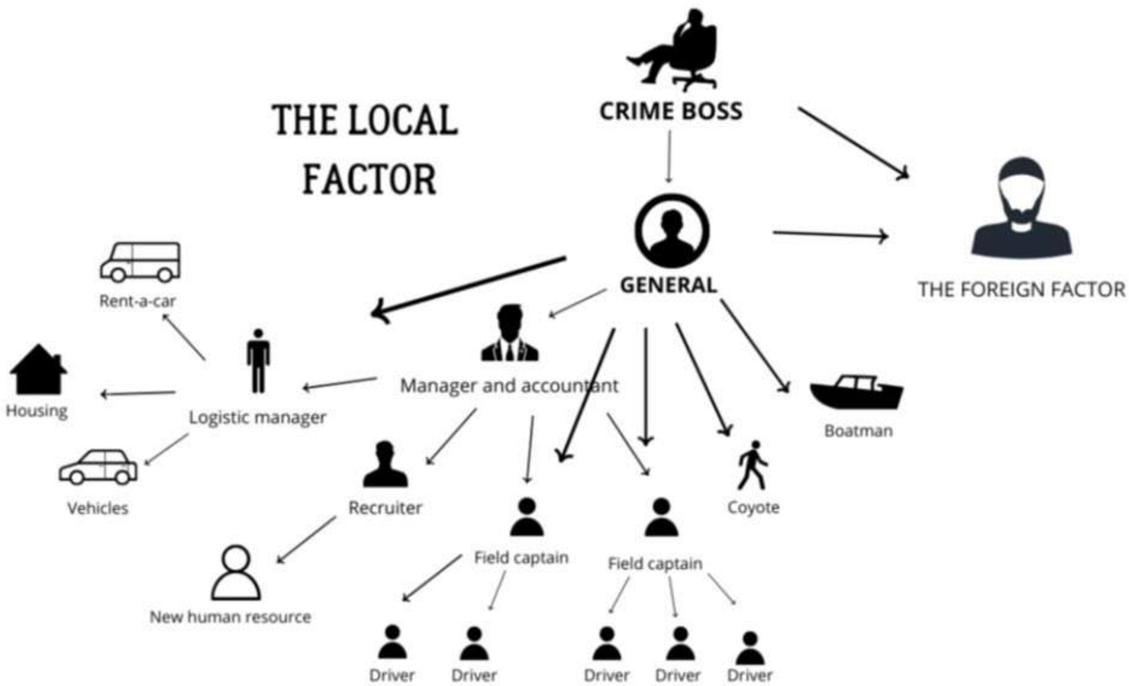

Figure 3.3. Schematic representation of the local factor model

NB: This figure shows the hierarchical structure wherein a single crime boss may oversee multiple generals while simultaneously managing various criminal branches beyond migrant smuggling, such as a drug trafficking operation.

If we consider an example, the local factor in Bulgaria is primarily operated by Bulgarian OCGs, which are often part of broader international criminal networks. However, in some cases, there are OCGs composed entirely of Moldovan, Romanian or other nationals, which operate as entirely local entities, managing the entire cycle of illegal border crossings – 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 maximise financial gain and reduce the risk of external exposure. Similarly, there are cases of Bulgarian OCGs operating independently 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 Albania, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine or other post-Soviet countries with lower 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 categorised into the following three primary operational models.

1. **Entirely domestic local factor.** The local factor consists exclusively of citizens from the host country. In this scenario, the 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 countries. 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 orders or instructions issued by the foreign factor.

In the context 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 is a generalised representation of the framework: roles may overlap, and one individual may fulfil multiple responsibilities. Nevertheless, each role carries distinct responsibilities that are critical to ensuring the successful transit of illegal immigrants through the host country.

1. **Leader / crime boss.** This individual serves as the mastermind and decision-maker of the OCG. They oversee all roles and branches within the organisation 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 higher level, often interacting with other chiefs or bosses. To minimise 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. **Chief executive officer (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 the 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 that operations run smoothly.

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

4. **Logistics 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 may 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 specialised roles are required, such as hosts, logistics managers or boatmen, recruitment is handled at a higher level within the organisation.

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 the following.

    - **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 specialised 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 Bulgarian–Turkish border. Their expertise in navigating mountainous and forested areas, often under the cover of night, is critical for successful border crossings.

In conclusion, the models of the local factor presented here are broad generalisations. In practice, 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 organisational aspect of criminal networks that functions entirely within the context of illegal immigrants and their supportive communities – mainly comprising citizens from countries outside the European Union. This factor includes individuals who are culturally, ethnically and familiarly 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 people 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, along with 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 countries such as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine ([8]) and Syria (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024), along with Libya, Morocco, Sri Lanka and some countries in central Asia.

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 specialised networks involving individuals – often foreign citizens in host countries – who have established strong, trustworthy connections with 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 the 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, recent 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 that all of the immigrants are alive and well. This footage serves as evidence for the guarantor, who then authorises 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 – 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 in transit. The head connection maintains reliable relationships with various 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

([8]) This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.

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 Türkiye that 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 countries take on responsibilities independently, managing the entire process themselves. These roles are similar to those of the local factor, involving tasks like providing accommodation to hide 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 constitutes service providers within the overall criminal network.

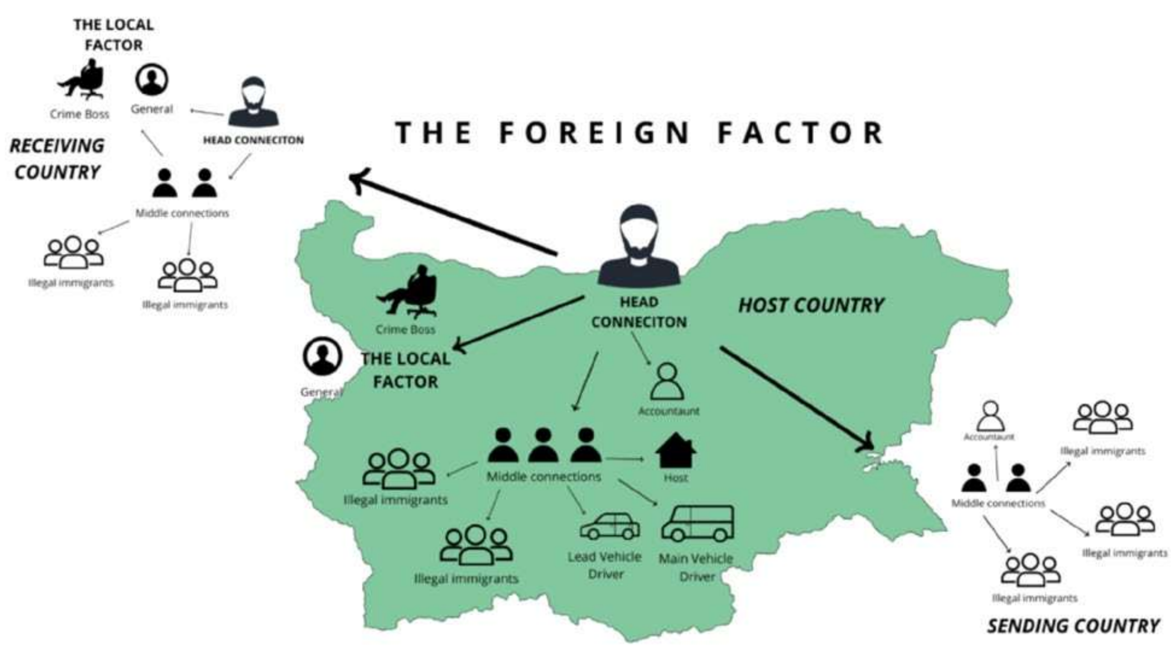

Figure 3.4. Schematic representation of the foreign factor model

NB: 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 directly or indirectly 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 Türkiye, 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 OCGs specialising in migrant smuggling, effectively extending the reach and efficiency of these illicit networks.

The factor of criminal and non-criminal actors

Throughout this paper, 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 analyse the roles of these non-criminal actors and their cooperation with the criminal factors described earlier.

It is essential to recognise 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 modi operandi and their actors within 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 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 scrutinise 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 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 OCGs.

Fictional owners and proxy users

Another tactic involves individuals of low socioeconomic 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.

- **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 under proxy owners, creating a layer of anonymity and breaking the chain of traceability to the actual operators.
- **Companies.** Shell companies established under 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 where connections are established. Illegal immigrants or their intermediaries can easily find criminal contacts in well-known venues run by individuals from Türkiye or other non-EU countries.

It is crucial to note that this observation is not a generalised judgement 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 favours to help someone in need. In some cases, intermediaries at these locations accept financial incentives for facilitating these connections.

TIR and truck parking lots

Truck parking lots, where Transports Internationaux Routiers (international road transport or TIR) vehicles (i.e. 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 lots are also centres for exchanging information about corrupted firms or drivers willing to participate in smuggling operations. This phenomenon is particularly notable in parking lots owned by Turkish nationals or individuals from other non-European backgrounds, where connections between drivers and OCGs 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 categorised 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 an Arab state, emphasising that corruption and involvement in smuggling activities are not confined to any specific region or culture.

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 local or foreign factors.

Such places are sometimes used as camouflage, allowing illegal immigrants to blend in 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, organisations like the Mission Wings Foundation (FAR, 2024) operate independently in the Bulgarian–Turkish border region to provide humanitarian assistance to illegal immigrants. While their intentions may be altruistic, their activities can inadvertently support illegal migration, creating challenges for law enforcement and border control. On the other end are paramilitary groups and self-organised volunteers that pose a direct threat to national security, as illustrated by the following examples.

- Paramilitary organisations have been observed operating in the region, often with the stated aim of protecting national borders. However, their unregulated activities have been associated with the mistreatment of illegal immigrants and the undermining of the authority of government forces (Ignatov, 2022).

- Volunteer groups led by convicted criminals, who use their public ambitions to gain influence, have also been reported (Shikerova, 2021). These groups have been accused of taking matters into their own hands, including through committing crimes against migrants in irregular situations, 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 their 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, these sections highlight the symbiosis between strategically significant resources, locations and non-criminal spheres of business and social life, which are often exploited by criminal networks. OCGs capitalise 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 hotspot zones in Bulgaria or the high-risk criminal networks operating across the Balkan peninsula to profit from criminal activities such as smuggling people from the Middle East, North Africa or central Asia, a distinct pattern begins to emerge. This pattern is evident in recent terrorist attacks in Europe connected to illegal immigrants (McGuinness and Gozzi, 2024) (Sinha, 2022), and in various professional and academic risk-assessment methodologies that reflect observations obtained through the author's professional experience in countering high-risk migrant-smuggling networks in Bulgaria.

The same patterns and conclusions are echoed in Europol's 2023 report on terrorism, which documents specific cases illustrating connections between illegal immigration and the national security of states. In some documented instances, terrorist organisations and lone-wolf radicals have sought to exploit the resources of OCGs to enter European nations, as illustrated by the case cited below. The strategic importance of Bulgaria as a geopolitical factor and a primary entry point to Europe is emphasised in the report, which notes that: '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, there exists documented potential for exploitation by actors with such intentions (Europol, 2023). Illegal immigration – defined in criminal terms as migrant smuggling – extends beyond a criminal activity with significant financial and social repercussions. Security analysts have identified migrant-smuggling channels as a potential vulnerability that may be exploited by actors seeking to undermine regional stability and the national security of the state, highlighting the broader security dimensions of this phenomenon.

To underscore the significance of this factor with objectivity rather than prejudice, it is essential to highlight the documented associations between criminal involvement and radicalisation, particularly in the form of terrorist activities (Colomina et al., 2017), and especially within the younger immigrant populations (Bergen, 2017; Todorov, 2015). The psychology underlying individual cases of radicalisation and criminalisation is not novel. 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 remain alienated and marginalised, creating fertile ground for both terror and criminality (Madzharov, 2017). For others, personal histories or connections – such as the loss of family members, ties to individuals within terrorist organisations or lifelong exposure to criminal or extremist environments – ultimately shape their paths (Madzharov and Andonova-Tsvetanova, 2020).

The psychological factors that influence criminal and terrorist behaviours are strikingly similar, as are the methods of operation employed by OCGs and terrorist networks in their development, establishment and recruitment processes (Atanasov, 2022). A number of illegal immigrants entering Bulgaria carry their past experiences and histories, deeply ingrained in their identities. It can be reasonably assumed that among the illegal immigrant groups there are 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, Türkiye).

The convergence of all these factors illustrates the challenge posed by the geopolitical dimension to Europe. Over time, the accumulation of various criminal elements and terrorist threats evolves into a substantial risk 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 organised criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling in Bulgaria – a key transit country in Europe.

This research underscores five critical factors shaping these criminal operations: geosocial, 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 modi 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 the following.

1. **Geosocial 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 sociopolitical dynamics – including economic vulnerabilities and proximity to conflict regions – provides fertile ground for organised 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.** Documented cases illustrate potential security-related interconnections, including specific instances where migrant-smuggling routes have been utilised by radicalised individuals, further emphasising 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 socioeconomic disparities that fuel recruitment into these networks, along with 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 organised 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 pathways to Europe.

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