

## External contribution

# Role of DJSOC in the fight against human smuggling and trafficking and evolution of the phenomenon of human smuggling

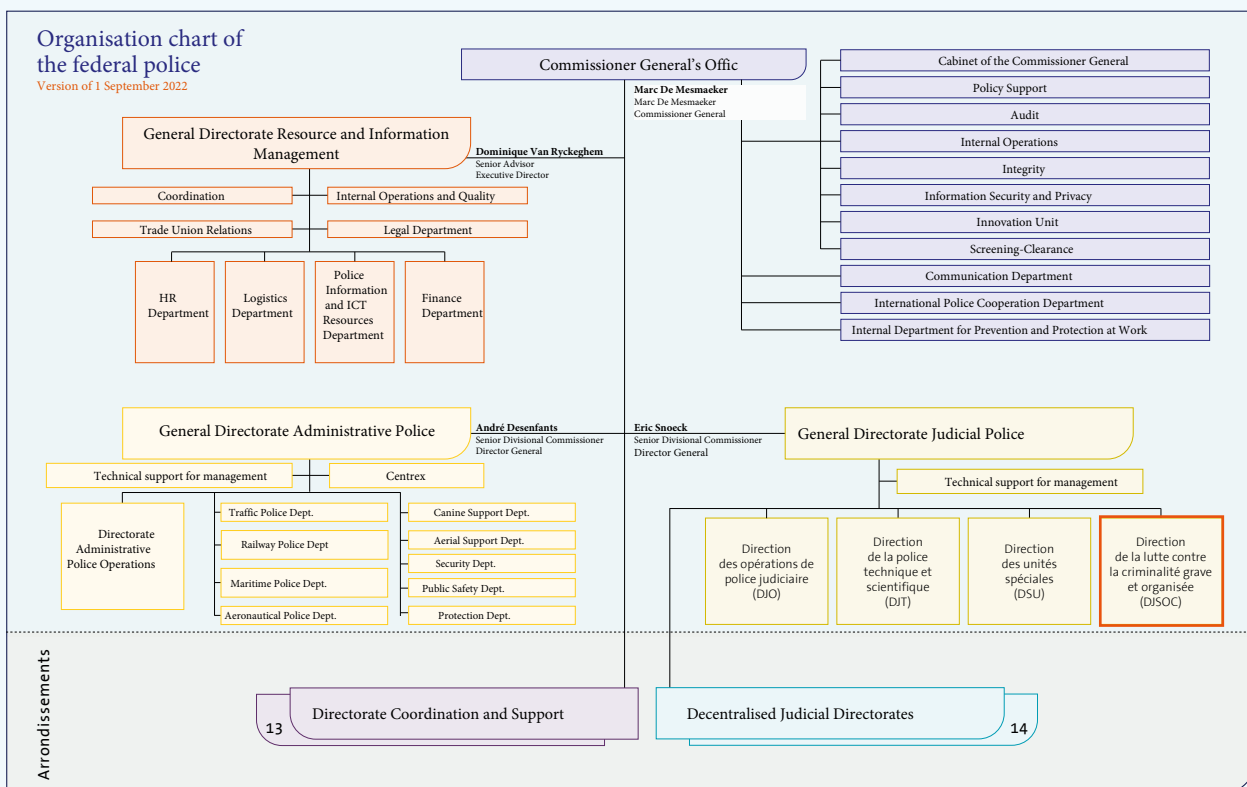
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## Introduction

Together with various partners, DJSOC - the Central Directorate for the Fight against Serious and Organised Crime within the federal judicial police - plays a role in the fight against human trafficking and smuggling. This contribution aims to explain where exactly DJSOC is situated within the federal police and what the main tasks of DJSOC players are in this field. It also examines the evolution of the phenomenon of human smuggling over the last decade, based on the findings and investigations of the police.

## DJSOC — position within the federal police and role in the fight against human trafficking

There is an administrative section and a judicial section within the federal police. DJSOC reports to the judicial section and is part of the DGJ, the Directorate General of the Judicial Police. DJSOC assists the FJP, the decentralised judicial directorates in the districts, and the local police areas.



DJSOC is composed of several sections specialised in criminal phenomena such as narcotics, robbery, weapons, cybercrime, human smuggling and human trafficking (THB). The THB section currently has 12 staff members. It also has a strategic analysis section, which supports the sections in terms of visualisation.

The THB section within DJSOC carries out various tasks, which can be subdivided according to their strategic or operational nature.

#### ■ Strategic tasks:

- Participation in meetings where policies are defined, both at national level (e.g. the office of the Interdepartmental Coordination Unit for the Fight against Human Trafficking and Smuggling) and at international level (e.g. the European Strategy Meetings - EMPACT<sup>320</sup>);
- Contribution, for the Belgian police, to the elaboration of the European strategy to fight organised crime in relation to trafficking and smuggling of human beings;
- Participation in work groups aimed at addressing certain facets of the problem (e.g. awareness-raising among airport staff);
- Provision of an annual nationwide overview of the phenomena as a whole and specific analyses of sub-phenomena (e.g. the risk of sexual exploitation of Latin American prostitutes in the private sector)<sup>321</sup>;
- Participation in study days, conferences, congresses as an expert in the field, both nationally and internationally;
- Maintaining contact with relevant partners (e.g. IO, NSSO inspectorate);
- Responding to parliamentary questions.

#### ■ Operational/tactical tasks:

- Research, exchange, and coordination of operational information at national and international levels. At national level, this is done in part through the FJP network of experts in the subject, which meets periodically to exchange information on investigations and new modus operandi;
- Facilitation of international police cooperation (bilateral contacts, operational coordination meetings at Europol or Eurojust, organisation and coordination of joint action days, etc.)

- Facilitation of the voluntary return of victims of human trafficking and human smuggling, in consultation with the specialised reception centres;
- Activities in the framework of the EMPACT action plans, especially for activities in which Belgium is a leader or co-leader (e.g. Chinese THB, Nigerian THB, human smuggling by small boat);
- Participation in the districts' THB platforms;
- Supporting local and federal police (contributing to training, sharing knowledge and expertise, providing operational support during actions);
- Centralisation, analysis and dissemination (reporting function) of information on trends and best practices in consultation with the DGJ;
- Launch of specific actions when new phenomena are detected (installation of barriers against criminal processes);
- Development and implementation of intelligence gathering tactics, based on ILP<sup>322</sup> principles in a proactive approach, to support operational activities

## Evolution of the phenomenon of human trafficking in Belgium

Between 2013 and 2018, the number of police findings of human smuggling more than doubled. This is largely due to the European asylum and migration crisis which, especially from 2015 onwards, led to a large number of migrants and refugees also arriving in our country, whether as a stopover on their way to the UK or not. These were mainly migrants from the Middle East (especially from Syria, Iran and Iraq), and to a lesser extent migrants from African countries (Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia). A large proportion (of which we don't know the extent) used the services of smugglers to get to Europe and/or to cross Europe in order to reach the intended destination country.

After 2018, the number of police findings of human smuggling decreased. This can be partly explained by the pandemic, which has resulted in significantly limiting travel opportunities and reducing the ability of law enforcement to monitor human smuggling.

<sup>320</sup> The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats is a European initiative supported by Europol.

<sup>321</sup> This task is the responsibility of DJSOC's strategic analysis section. In the future, the annual overview will be replaced by a permanent overview.

<sup>322</sup> ILP (Intelligence-Led Policing) refers to the integrated police service's continuous concern to guide the organisation at strategic, tactical and operational levels on the basis of information about insecurity, quality of life, crime and how the police functions (experiences and qualities).

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It is necessary to distinguish between smuggling to our country, with Belgium as the final destination, and smuggling through our country, with Belgium as a transit country, most often with the United Kingdom as the final destination. The profiles of the migrants and smugglers involved differ, as do the *modus operandi*. Most of the investigations of the federal judicial police<sup>323</sup> focus on transit smuggling. This is why the emphasis is on the following.

Up until 2015, the problem of transit and irregular migration mainly concerned parking areas along the E40 and the coastal region. Administrative measures (such as the temporary closure of some parking areas or the deployment of private security guards) have caused the problem to gradually spread to the whole country. Initially, parking areas along the E17 (East Flanders and Antwerp) were targeted. Then, smugglers also began to expand their activities to parking areas along the E411 in Wallonia, for instance. This is not so much a relocation of the activities - the smugglers also continued to operate in the parking areas along the E40 - as an expansion of the activities to other locations. The same gang was sometimes active in several parking areas simultaneously.

The most active networks in transit smuggling have been more or less the same for some years, although their *modus operandi* has changed over time. Human smuggling networks are flexible and adapt to changing circumstances or seek new opportunities.

Albanian networks have been involved in human smuggling for many years. They usually operate from larger cities (mainly Brussels and Ghent), where there are large diasporic communities that facilitate the activities. The organisers are mostly located in the United Kingdom. Our country is essentially home to the executive level. They use different techniques and modes of transportation to smuggle people:

- transporting transit migrants to a motorway parking area to help them into a lorry or trailer on a haphazard basis;
- transporting small groups of transit migrants to a pre-arranged location, where the transit migrant(s) is(are) handed over to the driver - commonly referred to as 'guaranteed transportation'. This often (but not exclusively) involves the use of Eastern European lorry drivers, who transport the migrant in the cab, thus reducing the risk of detection;

- smuggling in a private vehicle or van. This is less common.
- crossing the English Channel by boat. They prefer to use fishing boats or sailboats rather than dinghies, although this option seems to have been a common choice in 2022;
- Illegal air travel using forged or falsified identity documents.

Kurdish networks (mainly Iraq/Iran) have become particularly active since the asylum and migration crisis. They often operate from the north of France, where they have control over the camps and can easily recruit 'clients'. These are mainly (but not exclusively) migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Iraq, including families with young children and pregnant women. Some networks operate from the United Kingdom or Germany (extent of the diaspora). Until recently, they were operating mainly in motorway parking areas. They would either drive large groups of migrants in rickety vans to parking areas and help them into trailers on a haphazard basis, or they would provide more expensive transport in specially constructed hiding places or in the cab of a lorry. Since 2020, some Kurdish smuggling networks have switched their activities to the clandestine crossing of the English Channel in dinghies. Boats (and accessories) of this type are supplied in large numbers from logistics hubs in Germany and the Netherlands, via our country, to make the crossing from France.

The East African networks (Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Sudanese smugglers) appeared on the scene shortly after the previous networks. They generally facilitate the transit of migrants of the same nationality/ethnicity, whom they recruit in Brussels. Transit migrants are instructed to use public transport and to walk to parking areas, where accomplices help them into lorries. Several investigations have revealed that they are very active (sometimes more than 100 attempts to cross in a few months) in several parking areas throughout the country. From time to time, violent confrontations take place between different groups (smugglers and/or transit migrants). In the past, transit migrants would return to Brussels after an unsuccessful attempt. This has been less the case recently. Transit migrants stay in the vicinity of the parking areas. It was observed on more than one occasion that support from citizens' organisations had contributed to this.

<sup>323</sup> This is not the case for the FJP Halle-Vilvoorde, whose investigations are mainly carried out as a result of observations made at the airport.

In the case of Vietnamese networks, it is sometimes a combination of human smuggling and trafficking: upon arrival in our country (or in the United Kingdom, often the country of destination), they are exploited in restaurants, nail bars, cannabis plantations, etc. (so-called 'debt bondage'). The NSSO inspection department's ECOSOC units have already collaborated in various cases at this level. In several investigations, Brussels appears to be the place from which the smuggling is organised, where the victims are temporarily housed while waiting for other transport (especially by taxi to the coastal region), or where the victims are exploited. In addition, some organisations also operate from the United Kingdom. The Vietnamese generally travel in homogeneous groups. Kurds or Albanians are sometimes used but only for the last part of the journey, i.e. the crossing to the United Kingdom.

Addressing security issues related to irregular migration and human smuggling remains a focal point for police forces in the National Security Plan 2022-2025 entitled 'A resilient integrated police force at the service of society'. The detection and prosecution of criminal networks active in human smuggling will remain a major challenge for the federal judicial police in the years to come.