

**UK-GERMANY COOPERATION IN OVERCOMING PROBLEMS  
MIGRANT SMUGGLING, 2020—2024**

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**ABSTRACT**

Migrant smuggling is an illegal practice that involves the unlawful transfer of individuals across international borders in exchange for certain financial or material rewards. Germany's strategic location as a transit country makes it the main route in the process of smuggling migrants to the UK. In response to these problems, Britain established various efforts in the form of cooperation with Germany. Therefore, this study aims to describe the problem of migrant smuggling and analyze the form of cooperation carried out by the United Kingdom and Germany. This research uses the concept of international cooperation and the concept of transnational organized crime. This study uses a qualitative methodology with secondary data collection techniques. Data comes from vice sites, think tanks, media reports, and related scientific articles. The results of the study show that British-German cooperation in overcoming migrant smuggling is through seven forms of cooperation, including extradition, mutual legal assistance, joint operations, information exchange, tracking and confiscation of assets, and human rights protection for victims of migrant smuggling. However, this cooperation has not been completely completed because cases of migrant smuggling in the UK through German transit increased significantly from 2020 to 2024. This is due to conflicts, economic disparities, involvement in cross-border criminal networks, corrupt practices, as well as limitations and negligence at the level of operational coordination of cooperation between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Cooperation, UK, Germany, Migrant Smuggling

## INTRODUCTION

This case of migrant smuggling itself is an illegal practice that involves the illegal transfer of individuals across international borders in exchange for certain financial or material rewards (Carrera Núñez et al., 2025). Germany is used as one of the main transit countries for smugglers as well as a place to store logistics, such as rubber boats, means of transportation, and fake documents to go to the United Kingdom as the final destination for migrants. This was emphasized by German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser who stated that part of the action of migrant smuggling routes to the UK was indeed designed in Germany (UK Home Office, 2024).



Figure 4.1. Migrant Smuggling Routes to the UK Through German Transit

Source: bbc.com

Figure 1.1 on the map above, shows the main migration routes connecting the countries of origin of migrants, such as Afghanistan, and Iran, through Turkey and the Balkans, and then into Germany via Hungary. From Germany, migrants continue their journey to France and eventually cross into Britain, often through illegal routes such as trucks or small boats in the English Channel. (Thorpe, 2024). The line depicts an organized movement pattern that takes advantage of Germany's geographical position as a strategic transit center because it is directly connected by land and sea routes to ports in France or Belgium, then becoming the main access to the United Kingdom. The existence of this route makes it clear that Germany plays an important role in the chain of migrant smuggling in Europe, where organized crime networks take advantage of modern transport infrastructure and weak internal border surveillance of the Schengen area to facilitate the movement of migrants. This condition is one of the reasons why the number of migrant smugglers in the UK has increased significantly in the 2020-2024 period.



Figure 1.1. Number of Migrant Smuggling in the UK Through German Transit Based on Illegal Entry Methods, 2020—2024

Source: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

Figure 1.2 above is the basis for the empirical justification that this study is important and worth researching because the number of cases of smuggling illegal migrants in the UK through German transit increased significantly in the period 2020-

2024. The migrants' arrival was by sea by means of a small boat crossing the English Channel, while the air route only included methods without adequate documents (Home Office UK, 2025). Meanwhile, the UK's internal and port detections recorded only a small proportion of migrants who managed to escape initial surveillance, so the figures that emerged were the result of follow-up to the two main routes. Thus, the results of the graph above indicate that the illegal method often used by smugglers is to use small boats by crossing the English Channel.

The cooperation efforts that have been implemented by the United Kingdom and Germany aim to ensure that efforts to prevent and eradicate migrant smuggling in the United Kingdom and Germany can run more effectively. Then, the cooperation decisions that have been taken by the British and German governments in addressing the problem of migrant smuggling are in line with the arguments of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye who stated that through organized international cooperation in the international system, countries can achieve more effective results than if they acted unilaterally (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Thus, the background that the author has explained, this research raises research questions, namely; "What is the form of UK-German cooperation in overcoming the problem of migrant smuggling in the period 2020-2024?"

## **Theory and Concept**

### **International Cooperation**

Through the view of K.J. Holsti, in his book entitled "*International Politics: A Framework For Analysis (7th Ed)*", the definition of international cooperation is the result of the collaboration of two or more international actors who have certain common values, interests, and goals (Holsti, 1995). Holsti discusses three main dimensions in understanding international cooperation, so that it is an analytical framework that will be used by researchers (K. J. Holsti, 1995), including:

1. Motivation refers to the fundamental reasons, goals, and intentions that drive a country's cooperative behavior. Then, cooperation also refers to all the actions, strategies, and decisions taken by a country in relation to other countries and international actors.
2. Perception refers to how a country interprets, understands, and gives meaning to other countries' events, threats, opportunities, and actions. Foreign policy decisions are shaped not only by objective conditions, but by how policymakers view those conditions.
3. Role refers to the position, function, or identity defined by a country in the international system, as understood by its leaders.

### **The Concept of *Transnational Organized Crimes***

In this study, the use of the concept *Transnational organized crime* (TOC) arises on the basis of non-traditional security issues that do not only involve actors in one country, but operate through cross-border networks with a systematic structure. TOC has various types, one of which is the case raised by the researcher, namely *Migrant smuggling*, (Jacobs, 2013). Based on Article 3 of the UN *Convention against Transnational Organized Crimes* (UNTOC, 2004.) has explained the concept of *Transnational Organized Crime* which emphasizes that organized crime can occur when criminal acts involve more than one country, both in implementation, planning, and impact. The settlement of this type of crime is not possible unilaterally, because the mechanism of the crime penetrates the boundaries of the state's jurisdiction. Therefore, the concept of the TOC emphasizes the need for cross-border coordination in dealing with

crimes that have an international dimension, including UK-German cooperation in addressing the problem of migrant smuggling.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis. This approach was chosen because it was considered the most suitable for understanding in depth the two focuses in the research. First, it will describe the case of migrant smuggling in the United Kingdom-Germany. Second, analyze the form of British-German cooperation in overcoming the problem of migrant smuggling in the period 2020-2024. Then, the source Data used by secondary sources (Bryman, 2012). As per the official website of the British government, ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk); [www.gov.uk/home-office](http://www.gov.uk/home-office)), official German website ([www.bmi.bund.de](http://www.bmi.bund.de); [www.bundestag.de](http://www.bundestag.de)), *Institutional Report*, Think tank media news, books, articles, scientific journals, public policy reports, and data from institutions *think tank*. To collect the data that will be needed in this study, the researcher uses literature study techniques and documentation studies. Finally, the data analysis technique in this study goes through three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification. (Miles et al., 2014).

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, the author presents the results of the research and its discussion. The description of the results and discussion is arranged into several subchapters to make it more systematic. In the first subchapter, the author will explain in depth the case of migrant smuggling which makes Germany the main transit country before reaching the UK as the final destination. Second, the researcher will explain the form of UK-German cooperation in overcoming the problem of migrant smuggling in the period 2020-2024.

### **A. Discuss UK-German Cooperation in Overcoming Migrant Smuggling Problems, 2020-2024**

#### **UK-Germany Cooperation Relations**

Prior to 2020, the cooperative relationship between the UK and Germany in addressing the issue of migration and migrant smuggling took place entirely through the European Union. Such as EU legal instruments, namely Council Directive 2002/90/EC and Council Framework Decision 2002/946/JHA and EU institutions (Europol, Eurodac, and Frontex). On January 31, 2020, the UK officially left the European Union. This event marked a major change in the migration cooperation relationship between the UK and Germany. Despite leaving the EU, the UK is still bound by EU rules during the Brexit transition period until December 31, 2020. This year, British-German coordination continues through EU mechanisms, so there are no drastic changes regarding the UK-German cooperative relationship in tackling migrant smuggling (Mitsilegas, 2025).

Following the UK's exit from EU membership in 2021, UK-German cooperation in the field of migration and security has shifted from "transition coordination" to post-Brexit restructuring. The most noticeable change is the fact that the UK is no longer in the EU's security mechanism as it was when it was a member. thus maintaining the continuity of the crackdown on organized crime (including migrant smuggling) demands a more flexible line of cooperation with Germany.

Britain and Germany later in 2022 further strengthened joint operations to investigate smuggling networks in the Central European region. This is an important step

given the increasing use of Germany as a transit country for migrants trying to cross the Channel into the UK. In 2023, the UK will restructure its policies to deal with the problem of migrant smuggling through the *Illegal Migration Bill* which was later passed into the *Illegal Migration Act 2023*. This policy aims to stop the flow of illegal migration by reducing incentives to travel dangerously, particularly through small boat lanes in the English Channel. Then in 2024, British Home Secretary Yvette Cooper and German Home Secretary Nancy Faeser agreed on the *UK-Germany Joint Action Plan on Irregular Migration* as a new umbrella that guides cross-agency joint work. This plan explicitly targets migrant smuggling and organised crime behind it, while also seeking to remove barriers to operational cooperation and strengthen the exchange of expertise and intelligence (Home Office, 2024).

### The Problem of Migrant Smuggling in the UK-Germany

Terminologically, both the UK and Germany use the terms *irregular migration* (UK) and *irreguläre migration* (Germany) to refer to the movement of people across borders who do not meet the provisions of applicable immigration laws, either in terms of entry, residence, or work. In UK policy documents such as the *UK-Germany Joint Action Plan on Irregular Migration published by the Home Office*, the term *irregular migration* includes the entry of individuals without official permission, the use of unauthorised routes such as crossing the English Channel in small boats, as well as the involvement of criminal networks that facilitate such movements. Thus, migrant smuggling is positioned as an integral part of the phenomenon of *irregular migration* (Home Office, 2024).

The smuggling of migrants operating in the UK through German transit from 2020-2024 shows a highly organized pattern of operations that resembles a complex underground business system. Based on the findings of Europol (2023) and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2023), their main modes are divided into four major stages, namely recruitment, transportation and logistics, document forgery, and security and distribution in destination countries (Europol, 2023.). At the recruitment stage, syndicates typically leverage diaspora networks and social media to reach potential migrants in their home countries or refugee camps in Central Europe. They use platforms like Telegram and Facebook Marketplace to spread false information about job opportunities or safe routes to the UK. The syndicate also conducts identity swapping, which is exchanging the identity of migrants with original passport holders who have facial resemblances. This tactic is used to make it easier for them to board a plane from Germany to the UK via major international airports in Germany (Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin, Düsseldorf, Hamburg) to major airports in the UK (London Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham). With the existence of this air route through German transit, the UK experienced an increase in illegal migrants.

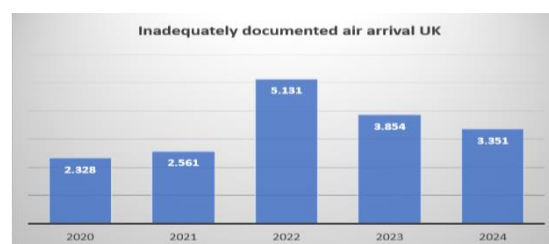


Figure 4. 3 Number of Air Lines arrivals with false documents in the UK, 2020—2024  
Source: [www.gof.uk](http://www.gof.uk).

The data in figure 4.2. shows that there are fluctuations in the number of illegal migrants entering the UK by air using the false document mode from 2020-2024. The surge was triggered by the increasing use of fake documents in Central Europe such as fake visas and passports produced in transit countries such as Germany and the Netherlands before being used for flights to the UK. In addition to using fake documents, another mode that is often found is container concealment, which is the hiding of migrants in logistics containers sent by sea. Smugglers syndicates send containers containing merchandise and illegal migrants simultaneously to French or Belgian ports adjacent to the English Channel, before migrants are removed and put into small boats for the final crossing through the English Channel, France.

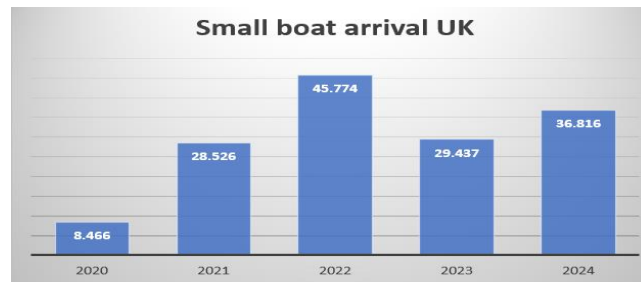


Figure 4. 1 Number of migrant arrivals in the UK via the English Channel sea route, 2020—2024

Source: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

Data in Figure 4.3. shows a drastic increase in the number of migrants arriving in the UK via the English Channel sea route throughout 2020-2024. This shows the increasingly complex dynamics of human smuggling. Migrant smuggling syndicates, furthermore, use financial mode as a crucial element in maintaining their sustainability and operations. According to UNODC (2023), most transactions are done through cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and USDT to avoid conventional bank tracking (UNODC, 2023). Illegal migrants typically pay smugglers syndicates between €2,600 to £6,000 per person to cross the English Channel in small boats. Meanwhile, the air route is much higher at around €7,000 to €15,000 per person. Payments are usually made in stages through a digital escrow system, where funds are only released after the migrants have successfully reached a certain point. The money collected is then laundered through fictitious companies or legitimate businesses in Germany such as restaurants, delivery services, and grocery stores run by partners of smuggling syndicates. Therefore, money laundering schemes are a strong integration between migration crime and shadow economies in Western Europe (Osisanwo 2025).

## **B. Forms of UK-Germany Cooperation in Overcoming the Problem of Migrant Smuggling, 2020—2024**

UK-German cooperation in overcoming the problem of migrant smuggling from 2020—2024 can be understood as the result of three-dimensional interaction in the concept of international cooperation from K.J Holsti, namely motivation, perception, and role. Motivation refers to the underlying reasons, goals, and intentions that drive the cooperative behavior of the United Kingdom and Germany (Holsti, 1995). According to the Home Office (2024), in the document policy "UK-Germany Joint Action Plan on Irregular Migration", the cooperation between the UK and Germany has several motivations, including:

- 1) Break the business model of organized crime groups involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking by disrupting their supply chains, preventing irregular border crossings, and ensuring smugglers face full legal coverage.
- 2) reducing irregular migration flows to Germany, the United Kingdom, and Europe.
- 3) preventing loss of life on migration routes and in the Straits.
- 4) increase returns of individuals who are not eligible to be in the UK or Germany.
- 5) strengthen European cooperation in transnational organised crime involving migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons.
- 6) maximising UK and German links with key regional partners to combat transnational organised crime involved in migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons.

Meanwhile, the dimension of perception according to Holsti (1995), refers to how a country interprets, understands, and gives meaning to other countries' events, threats, opportunities, and actions. In this cooperation, the UK and Germany show a relatively convergent perception that migrant smuggling is a *shared security threat*, not just an administrative immigration issue. Both countries also perceive that smuggling networks operate transnationally, flexibly, and are connected to other forms of organized crime, so this will have an impact on each country's territorial boundaries (Home Office & Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024). In terms of this perception, both countries view the problem of migrant smuggling as not just a domestic issue but a transnational issue that requires collective action. Therefore, the *policy document "UK-Germany Joint Action Plan on Irregular Migration"* underscores the importance of synergy between UK and German law enforcement agencies and the involvement of European partners in strengthening the response to irregular migration and underlying crime. Both sides also see the need to strengthen investigative and prosecution capabilities, as well as intelligence exchanges to effectively dismantle smuggling networks. This shared perception is what drives the two countries to step up various forms of cooperation efforts to overcome complex and cross-border challenges (*Home Office & Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024*).

In the role dimension according to Holsti, cooperation is not only influenced by motivation and threat perception, but also by how a country defines its role in the international system. In the policy document *"UK-Germany Joint Action Plan on Irregular Migration" (2024)*, the UK government and the German Government position themselves as responsible strategic partners in combating the crime of migrant smuggling through a coordinated law enforcement approach. Britain is playing a role in strengthening border security and investigative capacity against smuggling networks that have a direct impact on its territory, while Germany is taking a key role in dismantling logistics, storage and distribution lines of facilities used by criminal groups in mainland Europe.

The policy document also affirms a more specific institutional role, including the appointment of relevant authorities in each country to coordinate the implementation of the action plan. Where the UK involved *the Border Security Command* and the Directorate of International and EU Affairs at *the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI)* from Germany as the coordinator of the implementation of this action plan. Thus, the two countries are not only acting as diplomatic actors, but also as operational actors actively involved in dismantling the migrant smuggling business model (Home Office & Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2024). Through this action plan, both show their role as proactive, adaptive, and collaboration-based security partners. It is this role that shows how the international identity and responsibilities of the two countries are translated into concrete actions that combine various forms of cooperation. Such as extradition, Mutual legal assistance (MLA), joint operations, information exchange,

tracking and confiscation of assets, dissemination of information, and human rights protection for victims of migrant smuggling.

### **Extradition**

Extradition is a form of international agreement used by the United Kingdom and Germany in the process of repatriating fugitives to a person accused or convicted of a crime (migrant smuggling) committed to be tried or sentenced in the requesting country (UNODC, 2025). British-German extradition via *European arrest warrant* (EAW) in 2020. Then in 2021-2024 through *Extradition Act 2003* which is changed by *the UK-EU Future Relationship Act Below Trade and Co-operation Agreement* (TCA) (Home Office, 2024).

### **Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA)**

*Mutual Legal Assistance* (MLA) is a form of UK-German cooperation to provide legal assistance in the process of investigating, prosecuting, and executing judgments in cases involving more than one jurisdiction. This form of assistance can include requests for evidence collection, search actions, confiscation of goods, and the arrest and surrender of suspects or defendants from other countries.

### **Combined Operations**

The UK and Germany work closely together through their security agencies, notably by establishing Joint Operations Teams and *Joint Investigation Teams* (JITs) which aim to deal efficiently with migrant smuggling syndicates. The UK involved *the National Crime Agency, Home Office Operations, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office*. Germany, meanwhile, involves the Ministry of the Interior and the Federal Community, such as the German federal police (*Bundespolizei*) and *the Bundeskriminalamt* (BKA).

### **Information Exchange**

The collection, exchange and analysis of information on the nature of organised crime is an important basis for cooperation between the UK and Germany in tackling the problem of migrant smuggling from 2020 to 2024. Britain and Germany have become channels for migrant smuggling, so they are obliged to exchange intelligence information according to the limits of their national laws. The UK and Germany exchange information through the NCA-BKA police line, Europol (the UK still cooperates through the TCA), Interpol Notices, and liaison officers.

### **Asset Tracking and Seizure**

In practice, migrant smuggling is a crime that requires a steady flow of funds in order for network operations to survive. The smuggling network requires capital to buy rubber boats, outboard engines, transportation vehicles, halfway houses, as well as various communication tools used to track and confiscate coordination assets. Therefore, the ability of the British and German security forces to carry out Tracking and Seizure of Assets is an important factor in weakening the criminal structure of their crimes.

### **Information Socialization**

The UK and Germany are actively cooperating through information dissemination with the aim of combating migrant smuggling, such as providing education and campaigns to the general public and related parties on the dangers and consequences of such crimes, and inviting active participation in the prevention and reporting of transnational criminal practices. Then, the Anglo-Germans actively socialized

information through various channels, such as leaflets, media advertisements, television advertisements, telephone services, community activities, mass media, social media, and word of mouth.

### **Human Rights Protection**

Britain and Germany are building a form of cooperation that is not only oriented towards criminal prosecution for smuggling syndicates. However, both countries are taking steps to protect human rights for victims of migrant smuggling. This is in accordance with international standards that have been ratified by both countries such as UNTOC and *the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000)*, *the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)*, and *the Part Three Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA)* (Syahrin, 2021)

### **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the form of Anglo-German cooperation that has been implemented has shown the efforts of both countries to overcome the problem of migrant smuggling. However, the UK has experienced a significant increase in cases of migrant smuggling through German transit from 2020 to 2024. Therefore, the cooperation has not been completed due to economic disparities in the country of origin, conflicts, limited apparatus resources, administrative burdens, differences in political interests, as well as the potential for illegal collaboration and negligence at the field level that can be used by smuggling networks to escape migrants.

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