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The Digital Infrastructures of Illegal Border Crossings: Solidarity Actors and Networks in the Arabic and Persian Speaking Virtual Spheres

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Abstract
This article explores overlooked strategies and self-determination practices among Iranian, Afghans and Moroccan citizens planning irregular migration to Europe. While the migration studies literature often focuses on state use of digital technology for border surveillance, its role in facilitating unauthorized crossings is emerging. Through digital ethnography on Arabic- and Persian-speaking virtual platforms where people discuss European border crossings, this paper challenges conventional perspectives on smugglers and solidarity within these networks. It reveals a nuanced moral economy of smuggling, displaying migrants' agency and tactical decision-making within the broader framework of migration autonomy theory.

Introduction

This article stems from several months of digital ethnography (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Kavanaugh 2020; Suarez 2019) of some specific digital infrastructures used predominantly by Maghrebi, Iranian, and Afghan nationals to gather information to enter the European Union illegally via the Western Balkan route. In addition to subjects whom we define as 'travel facilitators' to promote their paid services or the reliability of the free trail maps they provide.

For most of the unauthorized migrants,[1] the mainland and sea routes to Europe start in Türkiye, where they embark on an endeavor which is commonly referred to as 'The Game' or 'The Adventure' among various ethnic groups (Minca and Collins 2021). From Türkiye, these routes typically proceed westward into the Western Balkans, primarily crossing

[1] We adopt Scheel and Tazzioli's perspective (2022: p. 10), defining a migrant "as a person who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary-making that are implicated by the national order of things".

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Greece or Northern Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these trajectories continually shift, often bringing people to zigzag around these countries, resulting in unpredictable journeys. Indeed, the Balkans play a pivotal role in the border externalization strategies of the EU, with the Western Balkan route emerging as the second most traveled path for unauthorized migrants aiming to access the EU (Klikaktiv 2023). A substantial corpus of scholarly literature indicates that migrants crossing the Turkish border to continue their journeys along the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes predominantly engage in irregular facilitation activities, including migrant smuggling (Gholampour and Simonovits 2023; İşleyen and Karadağ 2023; Mandić 2017). While this has been a long-standing trend for Iranians, primarily due to visa exemptions, there has been a considerable surge in the migration of Moroccans to Türkiye in recent times for similar reasons.

Starting from these premises, our objective in this study is twofold. Firstly, using some of these digital networks as case studies, we seek to reassess and add complexity to the conventional dichotomy between unauthorized migrants and those who are commonly referred to as 'smugglers.' Aiming to underscore the multifaceted, ambiguous, and intricate nature of these networks we emphasize the autonomous decision-making ability of individual migration actors. Inspired by İçduygu's call for 'decentering migrant smuggling' (2021) and understanding how actors who are directly involved in the migratory process perceive and negotiate the practices they engage in and resist (El Qadim et al. 2021), we delve into how critical actors including facilitators, migrants, and asylum seekers or refugees, perceive this process beyond conventional representations produced by the state.

Secondly, through a comparative analysis of Arabic- and Persian-speaking networks, which are characterized by diverse and intricate practices and collaborations driven by political, religious, ethical, humanitarian, or economic motivations, we examine the potential features of solidarity inherent in these virtual spaces. We conceptualize these networks as complex solidarity structures, which serve as domains of interaction that uncover and generate porosities and shifts in hierarchies and boundaries (Barth 1998) between and within various social groups in transitional spaces. Concepts such as 'moral economy' (Belloni et al. 2023), 'chav solidarity' (Hunter 2017), and 'interested solidarity' emerge as more fitting frameworks to elucidate these phenomena compared to the conventional criminological perspectives (Amigoni and Queirolo Palmas 2023; Belloni 2019; Keshavarz and Khosravi 2022). In line with Hobsbawm's concept of 'social banditry' (1974), we approach smuggling as a situated activity enmeshed in the historical and geopolitical conditions of borderlands that takes place along many borders around the world. Whether lauded as local heroes or persecuted as criminals, the place of smugglers in the sociality of borderlands cannot be overlooked. By focusing on these exchanges as they take place in the digital arena, our analysis sheds light on the migration process and the links between restrictive migration policies, mainly implemented by transit and receiving countries, and countermeasures experienced at the micro-level of smuggler-migrant interaction (Gonzàles 2018).

Our research builds on the growing awareness of the role played by digital tools and spaces in shaping the migration process as it unfolds and seeks to address a gap in the current academic discourse on virtual technologies and digital environments in unauthorized cross-border migration. The existing literature extensively covers the digital securitization of national borders through the deployment of surveillance mechanisms used by state authorities to monitor and control border crossings, and also deals with the role of the Internet and social media platforms in migration processes (Bayramoğlu 2022; Bernard 2016). However, there remains a dearth of research focusing on the specific characteristics

of the virtual spaces examined in our study. Both before and increasingly also during migration, unauthorized migrants rely on their smartphones and on social media platforms like Facebook and X as well as on applications like WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, Online and Offline Maps, to obtain information on routes and their intended destination countries, to communicate, and to seek help in times of distress.

The digital spaces we consider include Arabic- and Persian-language channels, groups, and pages which are accessible to the public on various platforms. These spaces, overseen by unauthorized migrants and migration facilitators, serve as conduits for arranging travel from Türkiye to Europe, often for a fee. Although their services frequently operate within legal ambiguity, they are made more accessible thanks to their cost-free nature and relative simplicity. At the same time, their administrators strive to present what they offer as more reliable and collaborative options compared to conventional networks associated with 'human traffickers' and 'smugglers.' Our research explores how the thoughtfully chosen language and rhetoric focused on unity and cooperation influences the way these networks are shaped, providing a space to reconsider notions of solidarity, human smuggling, and their criminalization. Examining the content and vocabulary used in these spheres, we argue that facilitators often seek and attain moral affirmation by appealing to established moral principles and civic duties despite the risks inherent in their clandestine activities. In contrast to the portrayal of smugglers as solely profit-oriented, facilitators frequently operate within shared moral frameworks and offer tangible assistance to those they aid. We align with a recent trend in scholarly inquiry which moves away from traditional state-centric, crime-oriented perspectives, highlighting instead the nuanced, multifaceted nature of these networks and emphasizing the independent decision-making abilities of individual participants.

Methodology

The rise of digital culture as a general phenomenon affects and transforms our daily experiences, from how we interact and communicate to the way we produce knowledge. As Hallett and Barber point out, "it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces" (2014: p. 307). Digital ethnography has evolved as a methodological adaptation to study cultures and communities within the digital realm. Originating from traditional ethnography, which involves immersive observation and participation in physical settings, digital ethnography extends these practices to online environments. This development became necessary as digital spaces—such as social media, forums, and virtual worlds—became integral to people's daily lives and social interactions (Hine 2015).

We spent an average of twelve months immersed in the digital worlds of different communities of Moroccans, Maghrebi, Iranians, and Afghans navigating their way to the EU via the Western Balkan route, analyzing in depth their interactions on Telegram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram. For Moroccans, Facebook and WhatsApp hold sway, while Iranians and Afghans prefer Instagram and Telegram, which are perceived as more censorship-resistant than others in Iran. Our choice of methodology reflects our personal and professional backgrounds, as both of us are fluent in Arabic and Persian and have experience in the respective geographical areas of migration, which allowed us to gain insights into these spaces.

We have employed various methodologies and engagement strategies to explore different platforms, ranging from entering publicly available chat channels to explicitly seeking out those selected by migrants who travel along the Western Balkan route. Each platform serves its distinct purpose and caters to different audiences; Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are used to promote paid services aimed at heading to Europe. These platforms feature carefully crafted videos with compelling narratives, images, and keywords designed to attract attention and be used as promotional material, conveying a 'make-believe' representation of the reliability of the services they promote. Conversely, WhatsApp and Telegram function mostly as channels for concrete logistic coordination among migrants and between migrants and facilitators. With participants located at various points along these routes, migrants can access vital information regarding routes, pricing, border control, and practical guidance at no cost. Most Iranian facilitators also organize video calls to discuss organizational details with potential clients, and since their participation—at least in the first stage—is free, we attended several of them. However, the openness of these spaces also poses risks with regard to surveillance by border authorities, which prompted us to implement various safety measures such us refraining from disclosing personal details, employing covert or semi-covert ethnographic methods, and selectively sharing information. Our range of channels and groups was guided by several criteria, including accessibility, membership size (from 1000 to 50,000), and the level of engagement shown by administrators and users in ongoing discussions and interactions. These factors helped to ensure that our research can provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within these online communities.

Thus, the main theoretical and epistemological assumptions behind the structure of an ethnographic approach are being challenged. As a result, new perspectives, reflections, and methods are required to ensure that the pursuit of theoretical work in this specific field of knowledge goes hand in hand with a reflection on our positioning in the field and its influence (Suarez 2019). Conducting covert online research in the context of migration studies presents significant ethical challenges which have been extensively discussed in academic literature. A primary concern is informed consent, as covert research often bypasses requests for explicit permission, potentially violating the autonomy and privacy of participants. This is a particularly sensitive issue when dealing with migratory dynamics, as vulnerable subjects might be unaware that their online activities are being monitored and analyzed. Another criticality is the potential harm to participants, who might experience distress or adverse consequences if they discover that they were the subjects of covert observation, particularly given their precarious legal and social statuses. The use of deception challenges the principle of transparency and can undermine trust in researchers and the academic community (Markham and Buchanan 2012). In light of these considerations, we applied ethical guidelines focusing on the necessity of balancing the scientific value of the analysis and the rights and well-being of participants. To minimize these concerns, we restricted data collection to freely accessible public spaces on the internet, ensuring that no illegal measures or breaches of restricted access were required to enter these digital environments. This approach represents an attempt to respect the public nature of the information while avoiding any potential infringement on privacy rights. Additionally, stringent steps were taken to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the subjects observed. No identifiable personal information about users was disclosed in the dissemination of findings. This meant anonymizing any data which could potentially be traced back to specific users, thereby safeguarding their identities and reducing the risk of harm or distress from inadvertent exposure.

The Multiple Iranian and Afghan 'Games'

The first set of networks we considered provides Iranian and Persian-speaking Afghan migrants[2] with information and instructions about the Western Balkan route and entry into the European Union.

Since the 1980s, unauthorized migratory flows from and trough Iran have streamed across Türkiye's eastern border, fueled by the urgent need to escape persecution and conflicts spanning various tumultuous periods. It is reasonable to surmise that a considerable proportion of asylum seekers and irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq used Türkiye as a pivotal transit zone *en route* to Europe (Içduygu and Toktas 2002; İçduygu 2021). Moreover, many Iranian smugglers took up residence in Türkiye, contributing to the emergence of the covert Iranian network, which is recognized as one of the five most extensive smuggling enterprises in the 2010s (Ballière 2023).

Recognized for their distinctive features, our first group of virtual spaces are used as hubs and battlegrounds for the dissemination of and contention about information (Ambrosini 2021). While ostensibly categorized under the rubric of 'smuggling,' those practicing these activities deliberately eschew the equivalent term in Persian ('*ghachaghchi*') and, instead, choose to adopt a lexicon and semantic framework which is antithetical to it. In addition to migrants from other countries, Iranians and Afghans refer to their attempts to traverse the Balkan route illicitly as 'the Game'. This term draws parallels with virtual games, emphasizing the importance of learning, crossing, taking risks, passing trials, and advancing to the next stage. Moreover, each subsequent step in the process is dependent on people's ability to navigate the space with caution, given the potential dangers and traps they may encounter. Those embarking on 'the Game' are labelled as '*khodandaz*,' which means 'those who throw themselves.' This term underscores their agency and self-reliance, embodying a Heideggerian sense of agency attributed to those who have undertaken the journey—an experience akin to 'throwing oneself into something' (Gorza and Zamani forthcoming). For a fee, migrants may opt to be supported and accompanied by '*rah balad'* or *'rah rawan'* guides, who are well versed in navigating the route. These evocative depictions of the guide are reminiscent of the imagery of historical caravans, portraying migrants as 'travelers' rather than compelled refugees. Often, these guides come from similar backgrounds as other migrants and driven by various motivations, they join smuggling networks, sometimes temporarily (Vještica and Dragojević 2021). Facilitators organize the itinerary and offer guidance throughout the journey, procuring various documents and tickers and arranging accomodation and transportations, while departing from Iran and Afghanistan remains, for most groups, a responsibility of the migrants themselves. Since the journey is composed of several steps, there are intermediaries with different roles: while the administrators of the groups play a fundamental role in their facilitation, illicit journeys rely on a larger logistical structure that includes accommodation, food, and transportation services, as well as brokers such as taxi drivers, hotel owners, and sometimes even lawyers (Gonzàles 2018). As providers of information, the networks offer insights for subsequent stages of the journey, including mobility, asylum applications, documents, employment, and family reunification, with separate channels explicitly aimed at asylum seekers. They constitute a distinctive online domain which migrants search for, rely

[2] Although smaller in number, networks targeting Afghans are also included, as many move from Iran and rely on almost identical services.

upon, and consult for various information and insights to initiate and sustain their journeys. Navigating these borders requires a detailed understanding of countermeasures and strategies to circumvent surveillance. Users exchange content, post queries, and respond to others' inquiries. Not only are the various stages of the journey described, but they are also planned and envisioned. Comprehensive details about routes, including the intricacies of each stage and the required documentation and equipment, are provided for free, fostering an expansive network of cooperation and solidarity wherein each user contributes their expertise to support strangers in planning their journeys.

At the time when this study was carried out, the services that were most widely used by Iranian unauthorized migrants encompassed the 'taxi Game,' with cars facilitating travel and departures primarily from Istanbul, and the cheaper 'jungle Game,' which involves crossing borders on foot guided by sequential GPS directions forwarded by administrators. Furthermore, a pricier option named the 'ticket Game' was available, with high service charges, typically in the region of 2500€ and above, which include the cost of the ticket, documents, and the possibility of selecting a secure European destination. During video sessions, users have the opportunity to discuss directly their choice of 'Game' with the facilitators in a live negotiation process in which those who have already undertaken the journey are often invited to testify. In one session, for example, a man expressed concern for his elderly mother and asked for advice on the most appropriate 'Game' for her. Suggestions offered by administrators and other users about the most suitable option were accompanied by prayers for her health, and encouragement.

Instead of a purely commercial perspective, the logic underlying these networks, and the actions examined here can be perceived also as a community-based activity that goes beyond a financial transaction (Gonzàles 2018) within the framework of a 'migration industry from below' and of a 'migration infrastructure' (Meeus et al. 2019). These terms refer to the manifestations of solidarity which emerge in response to the regulatory apparatuses that facilitate the dissemination of knowledge related to evading law enforcement, establishing connections with co-travelers, and accessing services conducive to mobility. These infrastructures represent informal networks that empower migrants to navigate the obstacles and constraints inherent in their trajectories. This approach entails a shift of focus toward the harsh reality of subjects involved in illegalized migration, moving away from interpreting these migratory flows and activities solely through the lens of the rationality, predictability, and linear progression which characterize a conventional 'business enterprise' engaged in the provision of goods and services. Moreover, it involves a shift toward examining the self-organization practices, representations, and methods employed by travelers or by those involved in the practical facilitation of migration rather than a fixation on the dominant and subordinate roles within an organized structure, which is common in popular and moralized narratives, typified by traffickers and smugglers.

One noteworthy aspect which contributes to the Iranian networks' originality is the relatively high number of women, who are involved both as unauthorized migrants and as travel facilitators running the digital channels. The increased number of women traveling illegally is a striking phenomenon. There are several cultural and political factors which have influenced women's decision-making with regard to migration and may explain the rising numbers of female refugees from Iran. Firstly, travelling has generally become easier and less risky than it was in the past. Secondly, the changing social and demographic context in Iran has contributed significantly to the increase in female Iranian migrants heading

to Europe. In addition, the massive protests in Iran during 2022–2023 have produced a substantial female exodus, with many women seeking safety and better opportunities abroad.

Research on the involvement of women in smuggling highlights both their roles and the unique challenges they face and are often motivated by economic necessity, coercion, or familial obligations. While often overlooked in the mainstream rhetoric of smuggling, which is dominated by male-centered narratives of exploitation, victimization and violence, women play a fundamental role in facilitating irregular migration (Sanchez 2016). A comprehensive study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reveals that women are involved as organizers, facilitators, and recruiters in migrant smuggling networks, which emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive approaches when dealing with these operations (UNODC 2021). Women are often seen as less suspicious by the authorities, which can make them effective couriers or facilitators. Furthermore, research on Irish women during the Second World War by Redmond and Farrell (2020) shows that their involvement in smuggling was closely tied to economic struggles and informal labor, highlighting the overlap between economic necessity and illegal activities.

Our research is particularly relevant given the dearth of studies on the involvement of Iranian women in smuggling within the extensive body of literature on smuggling in general. More specifically, it contributes to partially countering the traditional representation of women in migration as agency-less victims (Sanchez 2016). Months of observing their digital interactions allow us to cautiously assert that the women involved in the organization of digital channels are mostly Iranians and Afghans who embarked on the Game themselves and currently collaborate with male colleagues by equally sharing responsibilities in providing information and organizing video sessions, without any discernible differences in their language and behavior compared to their male counterparts.

Moroccan Harragas and the 'Risky' Journey

Since the late 1980s, when visa requirements for Moroccans traveling to Europe were introduced, underprivileged Moroccan *Harragas* have been embarking on risky journeys, often hiding on board cargo ships headed for Spain, Italy, or the Canary Islands. Today, amidst the proliferation of borders (Mezzadra and Nielson 2013) and routes for border transgression (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2022), similarly daring journeys are undertaken by those who are determined to defy restrictions on their movement and fulfil their aspirations to reach Europe. Difficulties in acquiring Schengen visas and the hyper-borderization of the Mediterranean and Atlantic routes (Sahraoui 2023) have led Moroccans to choose other routes, which involve flying to Türkiye, where visa requirements are more relaxed, and using it as a starting point for their journey. Moroccans ranked highest among the nationalities detected on the Western Balkan route, surpassing the Central and Western Mediterranean (Herbert 2016). Indeed, routes and their popularity shift rapidly in response to changes in the levels of security enforcement as well as in the social, political, and economic conditions in the countries of transit and embarkation.

The protagonists of this account are Moroccan *Harragas*, the organizers and the users of the digital platforms needed to support their border transgression via the Western Balkan route. Derived from the Arabic root '*h-r-g*,' the term '*Harga*' means unauthorized migration towards Europe. Its literal meaning refers to the act of burning; Maghrebi *Harragas*, the plural form of *Harrag*, thus conveys the idea of a person who disregards a red light. Without a visa, they 'burn' through borders, laws, and even burn their documents

to reach Europe.[3] During their journeys, Moroccan *Harragas* are increasingly relying on digital connectivity technologies as a key element in the strategic coordination on the way to Europe, from Morocco to Türkiye, across the Balkans, and to Schengen countries. Beyond their immediate effects, which include helping people to transgress Europe's physical borders, it is crucial to acknowledge the broader significance of these digital infrastructures, whether in the imaginaries surrounding 'pictured' or 'inhabited' spaces along the routes or in their potential to challenge the tight checks which are put in place to enforce borders. The case we discuss comes from a particular relationship forged in this *milieu* of mutual aid and cooperation. This infrastructure is a means of sharing images of border crossings, logistical details needed to cross and make-believe that this route and its underlying infrastructures are reliable—thus creating opportunities to share experiences, foster alliances, learn from mistakes, and engage in more complex forms of coordination and organization.

To better understand this digital infrastructure, we have observed four chat channels used by Moroccan *Harragas* located in Morocco, in Türkiye, along the Western Balkan route, and in Europe. Here, the account provided will be limited to a fraction of the exchanges between migrants engaged in gathering information, organizing the coordination of their journeys, the services provided by *passeurs*, and so on. The principles and directions at the basis of the organization, the resources, and the facilitation related to the journeys of the *Harragas* along this route are disseminated, utilizing these chat channels as observation points.

Whether they are in Türkiye, traveling across the Balkans, already in Europe, or contemplating the challenging Balkan route through these digital channels while they are still in Morocco, *Harragas* collaboratively build assemblages of information and logistical infrastructures which are shaped by the unique opportunities and constraints of this migration route. Not only do these platforms make a breach in the materiality of the bordering apparatus, but they also address the prevailing sense of mistrust, the need to access reliable information and avoid potential frauds organized by unreliable smugglers. Within these virtual spaces, a dynamic exchange unfolds in which effective strategies to face the challenges of this route are shared. Users engage in make-believe narratives, trusting in the reliability of shared information and resources on various aspects including travel agencies facilitating smoother transit from Morocco to Turkey, journey expenses, strategic rest stations, necessary materials and tools, contacts of trustworthy conductors, digital off-line maps showing routes along trails, key points of passage, unedited footage of river crossings, tricks for boarding trains and trucks, and locations of reception centers and stations along the route. With their continuous 'infrastructuration practice' (Meeus et al. 2019), they continuously produce facilitation to support border transgressions, while joining forces to claim justice for those who were deceived by unreliable smugglers. This collaborative effort comes from different subjects and is shaped by the connections between people involved in transgressing borders along this route.

The people who manage these platforms are part of the intricate fabric of social relationships built around facilitation and exploitation, which are tied to migration routes and the configuration of militarized border crossings in complex ways. Developing a platform solely focused on the remunerative services of smugglers is inherently destined to fail, leading to a deadlock of mistrust and swindles. The pursuit of profit can drive individuals

[3] Burning one's document is used to avoid being recognized as Moroccan— since Morocco is considered a safe country of origin, this can imply direct deportation.

to deceive others for the sake of accumulating money. To maintain these platforms, users contribute by sharing a variety of resources and services. "You have money you cross, you do not have, you also cross, but at your own risk" is an expression which is often repeated on these channels. Crafting platforms that resonate with the diverse profiles, skills, and engagement levels of migrants has become essential to build the reliability of these platforms. The chat channels are tailored to their users' unique flow. Interestingly, information about available services and opportunities does not originate from a sole source, but rather it is provided by various users, whose regular contributions result in an appropriation of these spaces.

These digital infrastructures offer knowledge and information concerning '*Iqama*' (residence), '*Isstekshafat*' (exploratory expeditions), '*Khe'rajat*' (border crossings), '*Rihla*' (the journey), and '*Taslima*' (delivery). Along this chain of people, stations, and information, there are groups of people known as *Ribirou* who reside in Türkiye and conduct exploratory expeditions twice a week. They monitor the deployment of control mechanisms along the fences on the Turkish-Bulgarian border to spot obsolete crossing points and detect potential new ones. When it is time to start the journey, the *Ribirou* conduct people to reliable 'couriers,' who drive them from the crossing points to a safe station near the center for refugees, circumventing potential border police checks. This is what is known as *Taslima*. Once the *Harragas* reach Serbia, they give the *Ribirou* their confirmation code to collect the fee for the service provided and for the services to come. If that step is completed effectively, the traveler is driven to Slovenia and then to the chosen Schengen country. Although this service provided through these channels tends to be reliable, it comes at considerable cost.

Those who cannot afford this chain of services remain stuck at the stage known as *Iqama* for a while. They dwell in specific shared rooms, where they can reside for a brief period of time. Some people work in the informal economy to gather the money needed for the next steps of their journey. Those who want to accelerate the process become a *Ribirou* for some time; by doing this, they make money providing services and gain in-depth knowledge of how off-line maps are produced and circulated. These people circulate ready-made maps in other sub-groups and chat channels to support those who cannot afford a *Taslima*. Those provided with digital maps are sometimes supplied with the deemed valuable tools and materials in exchange for the symbolic price (shoes, coats, sleeping bags, and inflatables to help cross rivers), and are joined by a conductor who only leads them to the detected points of passage. From there, the conductor leaves the group to cross forests and rivers in the Balkans, relying on the digital maps at their disposal. Some survive the journey thanks to their resourcefulness and by jumping on trains and trucks, while others lose their lives. Within these channels, the ordeals of people's journeys are broadcast, praising the reliability of the maps and the heroism of some travelers who rely on riskier methods. Tragedies encountered along the route are also documented.

Peer Justice Against the Monopolization of Border-Crossing Routes

Bilger et al. (2006) introduced a relational element to the business, identifying the smuggler as a service provider and the migrant as a service user. This approach allows us to examine the influence of migrant clients on the smuggling market, bringing demand to the fore. This aspect becomes relevant if we consider that people are always susceptible to being defrauded in the process of border crossings. The plethora of options available

online presents itself as a complex environment, in which trust must be approached with caution and credibility is established through cross-validation. On one side, there is the rhetoric of the sellers; on the other, there is the lived experience of those who have made crossings. It can be reasonably argued that this complex communication system prioritizes prevention over the acceptance of fraudulent and unreliable offers. To deal with the latter, users in various locations have formed a coalition built around solidarity with the victims of unreliable smugglers. In all the digital spaces, we observe instances of individuals uniting and cooperating to share visual evidence, screenshots of conversations, pictures, addresses of the disputed smugglers, and information about the routes along which they operate to warn other people using that route.

M., a Moroccan migrant we met in Ventimiglia, had traveled along that route before arriving in Italy. This is how they describe this form of cooperation:

> Choices have consequences! You always take risks. You are not dealing with the grocery shop in your neighborhood. If you want a safe trip, it is not enough to have someone you can trust… We need to do something about it. We can visit those who refuse to take responsibility when they take money, harass them, and make their job difficult... We can sabotage their work.

Similarly, on Telegram, an Iranian man replied to another user asking for information about the reliability of the group:

> Darling, I tried the Game myself twice, and I was deceived by *ghachaghchi* in Istanbul's square. To be honest, I was hurt by them, and in the end, I got nothing. But I have a lot of faith in this group.

The exchange of information within these spaces, which is shared free of charge, can be construed as a solidarity practice that contributes to the cultivation and expansion of the migration industry from below (Cohen 2001, Bonnin et al. forthcoming). By providing free insights, guidance, and support to fellow migrants, individuals contribute to their community's collective empowerment and resilience. Not only does this practice facilitate mobility, but it also fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual aid among participants (De Genova 2017). What emerges is a form of peer-driven justice, in which actions spill over from the virtual realm into the real world. Consequently, disputed smugglers who are known for fraudulent conduct face exposure, sometimes violent harassment. In these platforms we note collaboration among migrants and facilitators uncovers a wide range of options. Sometimes 'claimants of justice' denounce unreliable smugglers, even without the involvement of the victims, simply to demonstrate their commitment. At other times, there are collective discussions about strategies to avoid fraudulent conduct and preserve individual projects aimed at specific destinations. Sometimes, these same people agree not to interfere with each other's businesses; yet, at other times, they denounce one another, alleging certain conditions, events, and attitudes are not fair in order to manipulate how much attention newcomers pay to them and their services. Above all, this collective criticism is not merely a reaction to isolated fraudulent activities or issues of reliability, but rather it is a concerted effort to thwart those who seek to monopolize border-crossing pathways by spreading misinformation and perpetrating frauds. In essence, this ad hoc cooperation aims to prevent unreliable smugglers from taking over the means needed to cross borders, protecting some unauthorized migrants from having their journeys prematurely sabotaged by unscrupulous actors. It is a form of solidarity among those who, driven by a shared desire to cross borders and reach other countries, choose to challenge what keeps them confined, a

solidarity which can break the isolation that tends to frustrate people's attempts to transgress borders.

From an academic perspective, it is an example of bottom-up social organization and collective action theories, reflecting a form of 'horizontal materialistic solidarity' wherein individuals, who are often marginalized or excluded from formal support structures, come together to face shared challenges, and achieve common goals. In this context, the exchange of information serves as a means of collective self-help, allowing people on the move to navigate complex migration routes and face challenges with relative efficacy. Moreover, this practice can be seen as an example of 'everyday economy' within the migration industry, wherein valuable resources and services are exchanged outside formal market mechanisms, and according to various intentions. While traditional economic exchanges may involve monetary transactions, exchanging information represents a non-monetary form of value creation driven by social and communal bonds. Not only does the free exchange facilitate individual migration, but it also contributes to the resilience and development of a grassroot migratory industry, empowering migrants to assert agency and navigate their journeys with greater autonomy and solidarity (De Genova and Peutz 2010).

Our findings reveal social exchanges and negotiations between migrants and facilitators and among migrants throughout their journey. These migrant narratives often paint a favorable image of smugglers. Facilitators employ meticulous strategies to cultivate a positive reputation and nurture trust in their relationships with migrants by, for instance, adopting a friendly and sometimes affectionate demeanor. These observations are substantiated by declarations which demonstrate how smuggling is perceived as a service provided to people seeking refuge, a practice entrenched in the region's history of migration from Morocco, Afghanistan, and Iran to Türkiye and mostly North-European countries. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that, while migrant smuggling is primarily driven by demand, it can also turn into a supply-driven process in different contexts and at various stages of migration. İçduygu (2021) highlights the significance of trust in the smuggling process along the route to Europe, which is intricately linked to the typical characteristics of migrant smuggling in the region. Notably, the idea of humanitarian smuggling is tied to a portrayal of smugglers as 'saviors' in the eyes of unauthorized migrants, while smugglers view their services as a means to 'save people,' underscoring the centrality of consent and trust in the facilitation of these processes.

'Smugglers,' 'Facilitators' and 'Migrants': Navigating Labels

Early research on migrant smuggling has been rightly criticized for its narrow focus on profitability, neglecting the social and non-monetary dimensions of the issue (Herman 2006). Additionally, this body of work largely ignored the role of the smuggler, prioritizing state-centric views of crime over a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Van Liempt and Doomernik 2006). The same is true in criminology, where research on smuggling facilitation is scarce and most efforts are directed at identifying its links to trafficking, with the two terms often problematically used interchangeably (Sanchez 2016). In contrast, more recent studies represent a critical shift, as they seek to decenter these outdated perspectives, challenge dominant narratives, and scrutinize the discursive and legal processes through which states criminalize migrant smuggling (İçduygu 2021; Brachet 2018; Zhang et al. 2018; Watson 2015). This approach advances a more nuanced and informed understanding of the complexities surrounding migrant smuggling. Our reflection is grounded

in the study of the intricate dynamics within the 'migratory industry,' specifically as they relate to particular migratory routes. This industry encompasses a wide array of entrepreneurs, businesses, services, and actors—including smugglers, traffickers, and other unconventional entities—who are driven by financial gain to facilitate and sustain international migration (Castles 2003; Chin 1999; Hernandez-Leon 2005; Kyle and Koslowski 2011; Coen 2001; Nadig 2002). This conceptual framework challenges state-centric narratives, arguing instead that stringent border control measures do not curtail smuggling activities but rather fuel their expansion.

Building on this wave of scholarly work, we seek to overcome these limitations by offering novel theoretical and empirical insights that challenge conventional categorizations of 'migrants,' 'smugglers,' and 'facilitators' across two different geographical, political, and social contexts It is important to recognize that the proliferation of border control technologies, rather than solely creating insurmountable barriers, fosters new interrelations and interdependencies that render these routes navigable. Through various infrastructural means, border crossings become possible, with individuals involved in various stages of the journey assuming diverse statuses and activities. Although migrants make critical decisions and assume roles throughout their passage, these actions do not occur in a social vacuum. The interplay of these forces underscores the complexity of migration, revealing how border controls, rather than deterring migration, actually generate the very conditions that make smuggling and other forms of irregular border transgression viable.

Our stance emphasizes the critical need to explore the intricate relationships between the various actors involved in border crossings. By doing so, we move beyond simplistic portrayals of crime and reimagine how statuses and intentions transform when migrants and facilitators come together around the act of border transgression.

Borders are dynamic, ever-changing terrains that facilitate interactions between migrants and those who aid their movements, even when these activities are unauthorized. On the digital platforms we analyze, migrants and facilitators co-create responses to challenges based on collective resources and shared experiences in mobility. These interactions are shaped by 'social terrains' (Vigh 2006) of possibilities which significantly influences the choices and actions of individuals. While migrants make decisions and assume roles independently, their actions are deeply embedded within the broader social context. Their journeys are marked by encounters with facilitators, controllers, scammers, and others on the move, all of whom contribute to the complex chessboard of border navigation.

The cases we present highlight the crucial role of adapting to the restrictive politics of migration, developing new strategies for clandestine border crossing. The adaptation unfolds on underground, illicit knowledge, its production, and its circulation, which fundamentally allow illegalized migrants to move across borders and survive despite the efforts of governments to impede their journeys and repatriate them. We acknowledge the burgeoning significance of digital methodologies in migration studies, from which we have borrowed Fraser's notion of 'subaltern counter publics' (1990) and Castells's concepts of 'resistance identities' and 'new communities' (1997). The former are discursive arenas wherein members of marginalized social cohorts fashion and disseminate counter-narratives, which allows them to formulate dissenting interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Castells defines resistance identities as those which are formed in opposition to the dominant norms, values, and structures imposed by prevailing power relations in society. These identities are developed by social groups that feel marginalized or oppressed and seek to affirm their distinctiveness and autonomy by resisting the mainstream forces of globalization, capitalism, and state power. Often, these groups can form new types of communities facilitated by advancements in information and communication technologies

that transcend traditional geographic and social boundaries, forming what Castells calls 'networked societies.'

For Moroccan *Harragas* and the Persian-speaking groups, the primary goal of their group coalition is not to attack unreliable smuggling networks directly, but to protect a specific moral economy linked to the facilitation of border crossings. Their efforts to counteract smugglers' scams are driven by opposition to the breach of promises and the thwarting of migrants' attempts to cross borders autonomously. This is not an anti-smuggling struggle; instead, it is an endeavor to preserve the conditions for a safe passage for specific communities. Moroccan *Harragas* do not contest the act of smuggling or facilitating passage in itself. Rather, they oppose the monopolization of corridors for passage and the frauds that undermine mobility. This opposition does not stem from concerns related to profit, but rather from the awareness that deception can thwart people's journeys. Their 'resistance identity,' to quote Castells (1997), is evident in their efforts to challenge these power dynamics and focuses on the immediate effects of these dynamics. They are not seeking to defeat the overarching problem of unreliable smugglers, but they are addressing the immediate issues that affect their communities. By targeting what they are directly facing, they affirm their autonomy by ensuring that people can keep traveling along these routes.

Both Moroccan and Iranian groups form new types of communities, which are facilitated by advancements in information and communication technologies while also transcending traditional geographic and social boundaries. In the face of state censorship and global political pressures, many Iranian groups utilize the internet and social media to assert their distinct cultural and political identities. These 'networked individuals' embody the efforts to maintain reliable and accessible routes for passage. By forming virtual communities that defy traditional boundaries, they not only resist oppression but also create new, interconnected spaces for expression and solidarity.

Borders and routes are not mere physical points of passage, but rather they serve as conduits for discourses and relations which reconfigure our conceptions of inclusion and exclusion, citizenship and non-citizenship, hospitality, and alienage, across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic demarcations (Godin and Donà 2021; Perera 2006). As far as *Harragas* and *Khodandaz* are concerned, what we see is their capacity to redefine traditional notions of mobility, asserting their agency and reconfiguring the boundaries of belonging. For Moroccan *Harragas*, anyone can be a 'facilitator' and a beneficiary of facilitation to support border transgression at various points during their journey. Their identities are performative; quoting Butler (1988) on gender performativity, we could say that there can be no identity before the specific act conveys it. Thus, it is the very performative acts they carry out which constitute the identity of the *Harragas* throughout their journey. The same is true of the *khodandaz*, where migrants who are deemed fit by the facilitators to organize other groups and 'play cool' often become informal facilitators themselves, expanding the notion of 'smuggler' and erasing the boundaries between different subjectivities. As one Iranian woman told us: "The smugglers saw that I was self-organized and had nerves of steel, so they gave me other women to take across the route."

These interactions challenge predefined notions of 'smuggler' and 'smuggled,' demonstrating migrants' ability to forge situated selves through circumscribed agencies (Cabot 2012). Overall, their actions demonstrate the transformative potential of border transgression infrastructures in terms of supporting physical movement and unsettling social, political, and cultural boundaries.

Expertise in border navigation, mediation skills, resources, and practical knowledge are shared within solidarity and smuggling networks, which facilitates travel along routes, shapes people's circumstances, and influences the outcomes of their journeys.

Transnational webs of reciprocal assistance and support often emerge from the aggregation of various experiences and insights gathered across disparate temporal and spatial contexts which, despite their often-unstructured nature, contribute to a collective repository of knowledge. Indeed, these practices can be better interpreted if we adopt Papadopoulos and Tsianos's (2013) concept of 'mobile commons,' which denotes the ability of unauthorized migrants and other itinerant populations to establish communal spaces of solidarity that transcend borders, engaging in practices of collective resource-sharing, mutual aid, and social support. These mobile commons respond to the challenges and vulnerabilities which arise during unauthorized journeys and when people eventually reach their destinations. In these contexts, solidarity is no longer a static, singular concept, but a dynamic array of actions which flow through, shape social interactions, empowert irregularized migrants to navigate their (im)mobility.

It is crucial to acknowledge the nuanced roles which Moroccan *Harragas*, Iranian and Afghan unauthorized migrants play during their journeys. As mentioned above, *Harragas*, for example, cannot be simplistically categorized as just smugglers, but rather they oscillate between being 'smuggled' and engaging in 'smuggling' activities at various stages of their journeys. From the initial facilitation of passage to their own passage being facilitated, they embody both roles within the intricate web of unauthorized migration. This dual identity underscores the complexity inherent in their experiences and practices, as these challenge conventional narratives that seek to pigeonhole them solely as smugglers. The pivotal role of intermediaries facilitating border transgression becomes evident when we consider the active infrastructuration of information (Oubad forthcoming) and resources which is geared toward equipping migrants to autonomously navigate and circumvent the challenges and violence inherent in border control. Beyond merely offering insights into underground routes, these platforms serve as dynamic communities whose members actively exchange knowledge, experiences, and essential resources, thereby creating a reliable support system. In practice, these digital platforms transcend their function as mere spaces where information is shared; they function as dynamic catalysts for the circulation and growth of solidarity, thereby shaping and sustaining a collaborative infrastructure which thrives in the face of border violence and circumvents it.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of a sample of Iranian, Afghan and Moroccan migrants' border-crossing facilitation practices, this article challenges conventional dichotomies between smugglers and unauthorized migrants, seeking to shed light on the complex and dynamic relationships within migration networks.

While the use of the Internet and social networks during migration has been extensively examined by the literature, the specific routes which we discussed in this study have received little attention and, to date, there have been even fewer attempts to elucidate the characteristics of these virtual environments. While cases of violent and unscrupulous behavior on the part of smugglers or the involvement of criminal organizations should certainly be acknowledged, our empirical data suggest that the interactions that occur between migrants and those behind their journeys are far from what this dichotomy implies (Gonzàles 2018).

Unauthorized migrants are active agents engaged in meticulous decision-making processes as they plan their departures and subsequent journeys. Contrary to the portrayal of passive victims ensnared by smugglers, these migrants perceive themselves as resilient navigators who overcome challenges and make calculated decisions to expedite their journeys. Thus, entrusting a smuggler or intermediary with organizing one's journey becomes a strategic choice aimed at economizing finances, circumventing border checks or minimizing undue physical strain. Moreover, these narratives clearly reveal a relationship between migrants and smugglers which may fall within a 'solidarity and reciprocity framework' rooted in localized moral constructs (Achilli 2018). Mengiste (2018) argued that the facilitation of unauthorized migration produces a collective repository of migratory knowledge, fostering a community based on shared insights and on the overarching objective of shepherding refugees to safety. In this context, smuggling emerges not as an illegal enterprise but as a grassroots refugee-protection mechanism, characteristic of a bottom-up support system. While uncovering the details of the social bonds between migrants and smugglers in no way romanticise the work of smugglers, it does allow us to consider the complex nature of smuggling and to better comprehend other related migratory contexts.

Viewing routes and borders as constantly evolving social spaces, it becomes clear that rigid binaries, such as labeling individuals solely as 'migrants or smugglers,' are reductive. The digital platforms along the west Balkan route, for example, highlight this rich social terrain where exchanges between migrants and facilitators unfold. These actors have adapted to the restrictive politics of migration, developing new strategies for clandestine border crossing. On militarized routes like the one we explore through the digital platforms, the challenges of crossing have intensified, leading some migrants to become facilitators themselves, leveraging their border-crossing knowledge to navigate risks and help others do the same. This evolving landscape underscores the fluidity of roles and the necessity of understanding the complex interdependencies that drive migration.

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