

Study finds people smuggling 'boosted, not broken' by Europe migration policy

3 November 2016, by Luke Harrison

European governments have contributed to the European 'migration crisis' by blaming people smugglers, rather than conflict, for increased migration to Europe. The failure to open up safe and legal routes to protection and the focus on border security has actually driven demand for the smugglers, a major new academic research project concludes today.

The Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis (MEDMIG) project, which launches its [final report](#) at a meeting of European policy makers, international organisations and NGOs in Brussels, is a collaboration between academics at the Universities of Coventry, Birmingham and Oxford with partners in Greece, Italy, Turkey and Malta. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of the wider Mediterranean Migration Research Programme, the project is one of the largest of its kind.

The researchers undertook interviews with more than 500 refugees and migrants who travelled to the EU across the Mediterranean in 2015.

They found that:

- Conflict in the countries neighbouring Europe was the major factor contributing to the significant increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving in 2015 both as a cause of primary and secondary movement
- More than three quarters (77%) of respondents explicitly mentioned conflict, violence, human rights abuse and threats to themselves and their family as the reason why they decided to leave their home country
- Every single person who was interviewed had used a smuggler for at least one leg of their journey to Greece, Malta or Italy. This was primarily because they were unable leave their countries and/or safety or

protection without a smuggler

- One in ten of those entering Europe via Turkey had tried but failed to identify an alternative way to migrate legally, for example by applying for a visa for work or study, a UN resettlement programme or family reunification
- Smugglers are not always embedded in vast criminal networks but can easily be found in migrant social networks and local communities. State officials, the military, law enforcement, and border guards are also involved in smuggling
- More than three quarters (76%) of people interviewed in Italy and Malta had directly experienced physical violence and nearly a third (29%) had witnessed people die. Some of this violence was at the hands of smugglers but it also came from State officials, militias, military and the police

Although the arrival of refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean during 2015 was often presented as a single, uninterrupted movement of people to Europe, the research found that these stories and images of 'mass movement' into Europe conceal a much more complex picture. The causes of the 'migration crisis' were: conflict in countries of origin; the lack of safety, rights and economic opportunities in the countries to which people move, including Turkey and Libya; and the failure of EU governments to address the root causes of migration flows focusing instead on policies to contain refugees and migrants outside the EU.

Professor Heaven Crawley, from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, which led the MEDMIG project said, "Politicians and policy makers have treated the movement of refugees and migrants as a linear uninterrupted flow of people. This is grossly misleading. The focus on the points of departure and the sea crossings is equally misleading. These simplifications distract from what are often multiple

separate movements which converge in Libya and Turkey and help to explain the arrival of refugees and migrants Italy and Greece respectively".

"Europe's response to the so-called migration 'crisis' has been driven almost exclusively by a border control agenda. This has significantly reduced the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece, for the moment at least, but has done nothing to address the drivers of causes of migration to Europe. Several years into the 'crisis', there is still no sign of a coherent long term response."

Dr Franck Duvell, from the Centre on Migration Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the university of Oxford, said, "EU politicians and policy makers have repeatedly declared they are 'at war' with the smugglers and that they intend to 'break the smugglers business model'. The evidence from our research suggests that smuggling is driven, rather than broken, by EU policy. The closure of borders seems likely to have significantly increased the demand for, and use of, smugglers - who have become the only option for those unable to leave their countries or enter countries in which protection might potentially be available to them."

In 2015 an estimated 1,011,712 refugees and migrants crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in search of safety and a better life. Nearly 4,000 people are estimated to have died trying to make this journey.

The total number of people recorded as dead or missing in 2016 is higher than the total for 2015. Since the beginning of 2016 the rates of death have increased from 1 in 54 to 1 in 46 people among those crossing via the Central Mediterranean route and from 1 death in every 1,049 arrivals to 1 death in every 409 arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean route.

Dr Nando Sigona, from the University of Birmingham's Institute for Research into Superdiversity, said, "Given the ongoing loss of life in the Mediterranean, with the death rate in the Aegean more than doubling from last year, there remains an urgent need to open up safe and legal routes for protection. This includes significantly

expanding current resettlement programmes, increasing humanitarian visas or establishing temporary international protection for those with a prima facie case for refugee status and increasing the scale of family reunification."

More information: Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis: www.medmig.info/

Provided by University of Birmingham

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