

The Danger of a Single Story: the Migrant Smuggling Narrative

Gabriella Sanchez

Texas A & M International University

The narratives of the facilitation of irregular migration for profit as a crime in the hands of transnational criminal groups, appear consistently in the language used by academics, policy makers and civil society to describe migrant smuggling across Europe

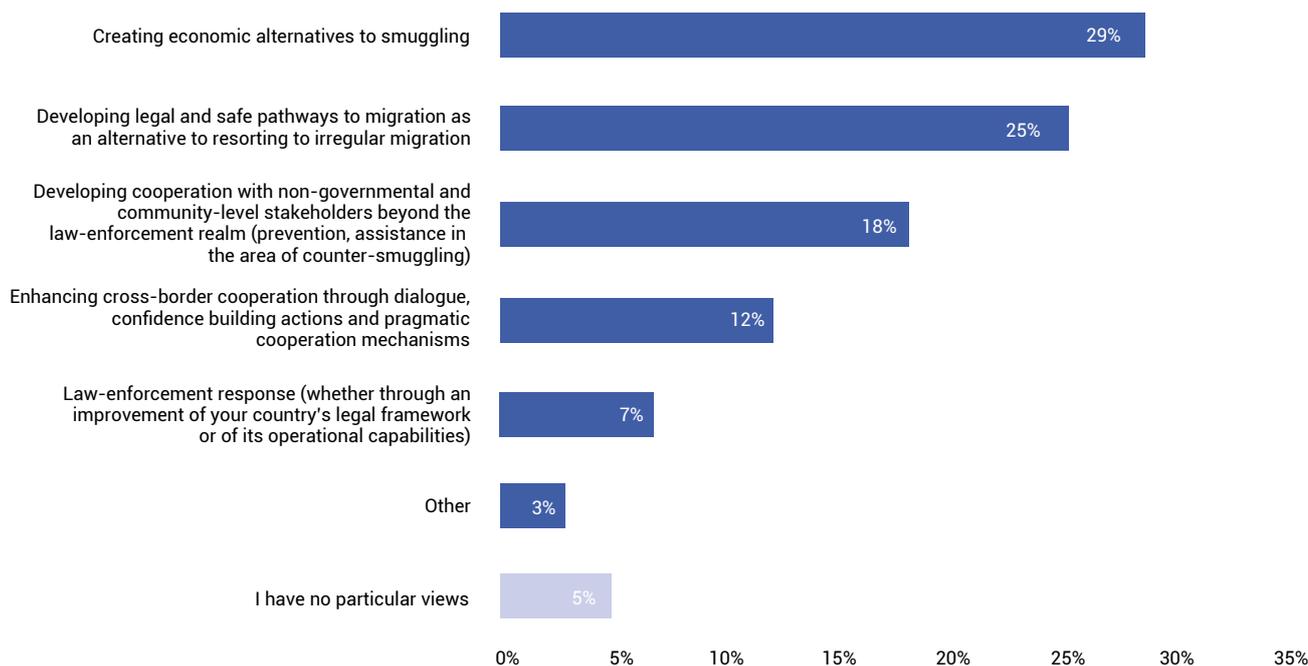
There is a deep-rooted and well-defined set of ideas at the core of the EU's migrant smuggling discourse. These ideas' resilience is evident in the very ease in which whenever asked about what migrant smuggling stands for, most people can easily articulate how it is carried out by ethnic mafias and other foreign groups pertaining to transnational organised crime, and that the thousands of deaths involving migrants on route to Europe can easily be traced to the despicable actions of the members of these heinous organisations.

Many of the responses to the EMM5-EuroMeSCo Survey Report regarding migrant smuggling echoed these claims. In fact, the narratives of the facilitation of irregular migration for profit as a crime in the hands of transnational criminal groups, and the implications this has on migrants' lives appear consistently in the language that everyone from politicians to academics to policy makers and civil society use to describe migrant smuggling across Europe, the Mediterranean and beyond.

The solutions some of the survey's respondents made to counter smuggling are also strikingly similar to those proposed by politicians and policy makers at large. For example, in the survey, respondents called for the need to dismantle the smugglers' business model and to counter the spread and influence of the groups behind it (key components of the EU's 2021-2025 Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling). Others argued that the only way to curtail the heinous crimes of smugglers requires countering the drivers behind migration, and called for the implementation of even more information campaigns that could communicate to vulnerable and naïve migrants the risks inherent to irregular migration, another common proposition made by policy makers. Other responses did make reference to smuggling's role as a pressing security issue afflicting cross-border cooperation, and to the need to identify its impacts on the interactions of countries throughout North Africa and the Sahel with the EU, yet another recommendation present in policy briefs and research reports.

GRAPH 1

Q.13 What is the most effective way to fight migrant smuggling?



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the EMM5-EuroMeSCO Euromed Survey

It would be a mistake not to recognize that migrant smuggling– the facilitation for profit of the irregular entry of a person into a country different from their own– does constitute a pressing security issue afflicting Europe and its neighbours in the Southern Mediterranean. Despite the pandemic, the number of migrants arriving irregularly to EU's coasts reached record numbers. An often-quoted Europol-INTERPOL report (2016) emphasized that most irregular entries by sea into the EU are in fact facilitated by smugglers. It is also undeniable that many of smuggling's actors– including those working for the state– often engage in criminal and violent acts that compromise the lives of migrants and their communities (Euromed Monitor, 2021).

And yet, a quick review of the literature on smuggling reveals that these claims and plenty of the articulated solutions to counter smuggling's reach have remained almost intact during the last twenty years. In other words, from the time the very term entered the international security lexicon, migrant smuggling has been largely articulated as a form of transnational threat (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020) or under the control of greedy and violent racialised men constituted into gangs (Maher, 2018). The almost uncontrollable reach of these foreign gangs, we are told, constitutes an

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extreme threat to the stability of the global north for the other forms of crimes it can unleash –from terrorism to sex trafficking to the drug trade (Achilli & Tinti, 2019).

The narrative has proven to be quite dependable, for it has again hardly changed, and is readily redeployed whenever a tragedy involving migrant deaths occurs. (As this contribution is being drafted, the world mourns the deaths of at least 27 migrants who lost their lives while trying to reach the UK from France, deaths that politicians and academics alike immediately attributed to “ruthless criminal gangs” and their “business model”).

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Fortunately, over the years many researchers have come forward, demonstrating that many of the claims long taken for granted in regard to smuggling have in fact scant empirical backing, tend to exaggerate the realities on the ground, or are simply unplausible. Irregular migratory journeys, we now know, are not merely the result of the actions of organised criminals. Quite often we find out that those who facilitate migrants’ journeys are men, women and children (UNDOC2021a) organised in multiple fashions (Aziani 2021), at times migrants and refugees themselves having to pay bribes to other state and non-state actors to use specific corridors (UNODC 2018). Smuggling facilitators also deploy their own knowledge as long-standing residents of marginalized communities, and even their own experiences as irregular migrants on behalf of others seeking to reach destinations elsewhere (UNDOC 2021b). They do it with the hope of generating an income that allows them to survive, but also often to continue with their journeys (Achilli 2018). And while their actions are often depicted in reports from international organizations as yielding enormous profits, most smuggling facilitators remain living under the same conditions that led them to become facilitators in the first place, their mobility and income remaining rather limited aside from registering occasional spikes (Moussaoui 2015).

Findings reveal that migrants’ journeys facilitators are men, women and children organised in multiple forms, at times themselves having to pay fees to use specific corridors to other state and non-state actors

While the smuggling’s security narrative has a strong hold in our collective consciousness, there is also growing recognition of the need to examine the implications of counter-smuggling policy and practice. Multiple EU counter-smuggling initiatives, rather than dismantling smuggling networks, have had devastating impacts on the livelihoods of people within Europe, North Africa, the Sahel and beyond. For example, a growing number of countries is introducing migrant smuggling statutes and other initiatives aimed at criminalising the facilitation of migrants’ mobility. Evidence shows processes of these nature have effectively disturbed when not destroyed the transportation systems that for decades had allowed people to move within their countries and to others within Africa (Brachet, 2018). The designation of the transportation of migrants as smuggling in Niger forced out of the market experienced, long-standing transporters who feared being labelled as smugglers, human traffickers or enslavers, while stripping them of their sources of income (Fakhry, 2021). This led people on the move to have no other option than to entrust

their journeys to less skilled, unreliable agents or facilitators, who in order to avoid enforcement turned to relying on longer and more dangerous routes, which have repeatedly been correlated to increases in the number of migrant deaths.¹

Researchers have shown that despite the allegations concerning smugglers' technological sophistication, the core strategies that they rely on for their journeys have hardly changed—granted, facilitated to a degree by the availability of smart phones and apps—when and if available (Diba, Papanicolau & Antonopoulos 2019). Examinations into the law enforcement practice of demanding access to migrants' social networks on the grounds these can reveal communications with smugglers that can help dismantle smuggling networks, reveal scant effectiveness. Instead, it appears that the threat of collecting social media data constitutes more of an intimidatory tactic against migrants than an effort to curtail smuggling operations (Dimitriadi, 2021). Ultimately, the risks inherent to irregular migration and its facilitation can only be countered through the effective implementation of mechanisms that allow for equally accessible paths to regular, orderly and safe migration for all people regardless of their place of birth, residence or transit.

The prior paragraphs do point toward the growing awareness in research and policy circles of the need to examine the implications that migration controls allegedly aimed to counter-smuggling have had on the lives of migrants, the communities they travel through and the facilitators of their journeys—quite often also migrants themselves. This certainly provides much hope among those who have for a long time raised concerns over some of the official claims surrounding migrant smuggling, and opens a path towards accountability (an element to this day not present in counter-smuggling strategy).

The growth of the critical, empirical scholarship on migrant smuggling and the analytical eye of increasing numbers of other stakeholders on the implications of smuggling and counter-smuggling policy and practice is definitely a cause for excitement. Junior researchers—among which women and scholars of migrant origin themselves figure prominently—have been at the forefront of calls for improved and critical understandings of the processes behind the facilitation of irregular migration, questioning the state-centric discourse that has systematically silenced those at the receiving end of counter-smuggling policy (that is, not only migrants but smugglers and those construed as such).

And yet it is important not to let our guard down. At a time when calls to decolonize migration research have re-emerged and demands for gender mainstreaming seem ubiquitous in migration policy and research circles, few researchers and policy

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¹ To this it is important to add that there is growing consensus among researchers that migrants are increasingly forgoing the services of smugglers unable to afford their costs, and relying instead in collective knowledge and resources to propel their journeys with varying and often times lethal results. See Arrouche, forthcoming.

From its inception in the United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, neither migrant smuggling nor smugglers have been neutral concepts. The very articulation of smuggling as a threat relies on the construction on the persona of the smuggler as a racialized and gendered foreigner.

Counter-smuggling becomes operationalized against racialized groups, exempting states of responsibility over their roles at creating violent migratory conditions for migrants

Few researchers and policy makers have raised concerns over the racialized, gendered nature of smuggling enforcement and discourse. Representations simultaneously strip Black women of any agency or even intelligence, while rendering the experiences of non-black woman virtually invisible

makers have raised concerns over the racialized, gendered nature of smuggling enforcement and discourse (Sanchez, 2018). From its inception in the United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, neither migrant smuggling nor smugglers have been neutral concepts. The very articulation of smuggling as a threat relies on the construction and on the persona of the smuggler as a racialized and gendered foreigner.

Official communications from the EU and international organizations consistently blame smugglers (racialized as African or Arab men) of deceiving migrants to pursue irregular migratory channels, of forcing them to rely on dangerous routes or on knowingly embarking them on means of transportation destined to fail (Johansson, 2021). Smugglers with “Arab” or “African-ness” surnames are also consistently emphasized the single-handed perpetrators of the quite graphic (if by now rather prototypical) acts of violence migrants face (Alagna, 2020). There is in fact an overabundance of all-too detailed texts and images that allegedly seek to document the violence and abuse migrants experience on the migration pathway.

However, devoid of socio-political context and of migrants’ own perspectives, academic and policy depictions of suffering, racialized bodies on the migration pathway reduce migrant’s experience to voyeuristic representations of black and brown bodies victimized by no other than people like themselves. This in turn distracts the readers from engaging in a real critique of how migration controls, and in particular, counter-smuggling become operationalized against racialized groups, exempting states of responsibility over their roles at creating violent conditions for migrants.

The troubling nature of racialized depictions of violent black bodies becomes even more evident in the EU narratives concerning the forms of violence women encounter in the context of migration. The clear focus of academic and policy literature to document the forms of sexual violence on the migration pathway as afflicting only Black African women, constitutes a stark reminder of the way black African female bodies have been fetishized for centuries (Holmes, 2016). One must not forget how black bodies, and in particular those of women have historically been portrayed as both primitive and mysterious yet sexually available. In smuggling policy and research, the experiences of black African women on the migration pathway have been systematically reduced to a handful of highly sexualized and voyeuristic narratives. Most reports on smuggling and irregular migration in the Southern Mediterranean depict them as sexually available women, condemned to a life as sex workers, sexual slaves, or as the voiceless targets of smugglers’ uncontrollable libidos (UNODC, 2021b). Representations strip Black women of any agency or even intelligence, while simultaneously rendering the experiences of non-black woman virtually invisible.

The hyper-sexualization of black African female migrants in much of the academic and policy literature on smuggling reduces the possibility of readers to consider the complexity of women's experiences in irregular migration, leading them to focus instead on voyeuristic representations of sexual violence and desire built around black bodies. At a time when gender is recognized as central to the migratory experience and a required component of migration-related analysis, the lack of engagement of academics and policy analysts with the way it is operationalized in smuggling, results in female migrants' bodies being rendered ultimately as sexual objects only. The dynamics and complexities of survival, friendship, love, care and intimacy that are essential in the migratory journeys becoming trivialized (Vogt, 2018) for their fall out of line with colonial, imperialistic perceptions tied to women of colour as sexually available.

Where can we go from here? Certainly, one answer is not to give up and to continue questioning the impact of smuggling discourse and counter-smuggling policy and practice in communities within Europe and beyond. Another is to demand accountability of the impacts specific to EU counter-smuggling efforts. However, we must simultaneously remember smuggling and counter-smuggling strategies are not neutral in terms of race, class or gender. These are essential elements of the way in which irregular migration is experienced, but also of how it is managed and brought under control.

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