

MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: THE CASE OF CHILDREN

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Introduction

According to 2017 data, the number of unaccompanied and separated migrant children has increased five times over the past six years on a global scale. In the European case in 2017 alone, authorities registered the arrival of 33,000 in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Bulgaria, fleeing severe economic distress, political unrest, and warfare. Although this constitutes a clear decrease compared to 2016 (100,264), the percentage of unaccompanied or separated children (UASC) has increased by 31 percent (UNICEF 2019). It is estimated that approximately four minors in every five (86 per cent) arriving in Italy and Spain were UASC (ibid).

Despite the growing visibility of this phenomenon, scant research has been conducted on children's migration patterns and/or their interactions with smuggling networks. The present contribution provides insights into minors' trajectories and their communications with smugglers and in so doing seeks to contribute to developing effective policy practices to prevent the exploitation of children on the move. This, however, demands an acknowledgement that the smuggling of children is often a desperate attempt to protect them on the part of the adults who care for them. In that sense, it is also fundamental to understand that smuggling practices are often grounded in community-based notions of cooperation and support (Achilli, 2018, Vogt 2018). When minors' exploitation occurs, this is more often the consequence of a protracted condition of deprivation and irregularity, emerging from their lack of recognized status, than it is a product of the criminal intent of mafia-like organizations.

This contribution is based on research on human smuggling conducted along the Eastern Mediterranean corridor between 2015 and 2017 among migrants and smugglers of different ethnic backgrounds (Achilli, 2018). It also draws from work conducted between January and May 2017 in Lebanon, Greece, and Jordan among children, local authorities and other stakeholders on children's migrations (Achilli et al. 2017).

Whose "best interest"?

Children's reliance on smuggling networks to cover legs of their journeys might be surprising. By virtue of their age, minors should be entitled to special forms of protection; especially if we consider that most – if not all – the countries they transit through have ratified the 1989 Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC). While lacking specific references to migration, the CRC provides specific guidelines concerning the protection of children. Article 3 of the convention states: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." In September 2016, the member states of the UN reaffirmed their commitment to addressing the specific needs of children travelling as part of large movements of refugees and migrants, especially children who are unaccompanied or separated from their families, in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.

However, the experience of children on the move as part of the most recent migratory waves in the Eastern Mediterranean and the actions carried out on their behalf by the states raise concerns over whose best interests are the ones being protected. In Greece, the prevailing tendency among authorities and the international community to enact "appropriate care provision" for minors on the move by endorsing the use of protective custody has led at times to the disruption of social

relationships and the exacerbation of children's vulnerability (Achilli et al. 2017). Most disturbingly, data collected in mid-2017 in Jordan confirmed that minors are particularly vulnerable to being forcibly relocated to detention centers in refugee camps. Children found to be working without regular permits are often separated from their families and relocated to detention centers in refugee camps. As a result, nuclear families are frequently broken apart and children become separated from their parents, despite living in the same country.

The journey

While media reports blame trafficking organizations for the disappearance of refugee children, no less disturbing reasons may be behind this trend. The reliance on protective custody and the increasing tightening of border controls along the Eastern Mediterranean route have encouraged many unaccompanied and separated children to avoid the child protection system altogether. In Greece, for example, 20 percent of unaccompanied minors disappear from reception centers within 24 hours of their placement there (Fili, 2014). The disappearance can be explained as the result of many of the children opting to travel, with the support of their families or on their own, with smuggling networks.

Minors travelling irregularly to Europe along the Eastern Mediterranean route seem to use the same channels as all other irregular migrants. The predominant route is from Turkey to the Greek islands by boat or, with increasing frequency these days, over the land border between Turkey and Greece. Migration trajectories from Greece onward depend on a variety of factors that are far from linear. Taken together, ethnicity, country of origin, time of the year, and especially the fast-changing scenarios of border controls make minors' journeys complex (Achilli et al. 2017; REACH 2017).

In 2015, for example, almost a million irregular migrants arrived in Europe – many of them minors – following the Western Balkan route. This trend was in part explained by the decision by a few Western Balkan countries to issue temporary transit documents for asylum seekers and migrants crossing their territories. The situation changed starting in early 2016. The decision of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to seal its border with Greece in February and the EU-Turkey agreement signed on March 20th of that same year considerably stemmed the flow of people through the Balkan route. It also led to the mushrooming of smuggling groups operating in the region, and increased the dangers faced by migrants (e.g., prolonged detention, arbitrary beatings, arrests, deportations, forceful separations, longer and more dangerous migration routes, etc.).

Smuggling, border control, and exploitation: when smuggling goes wrong

The abuses and deception suffered by smuggled minors and other vulnerable groups in the context of their journeys have provided the basis for the emergence of mechanisms of protection within migrant communities (Achilli, 2018; Sanchez, 2016). In this sense, the establishment of ethnic-based smuggling networks along the Western Mediterranean route seeks to provide assisted if precarious crossing services for migrants. These networks should in theory constitute a "chain of trust" (Van Liempt, 2007: 171), a concept that assumes the existence of ethnic ties between smugglers and migrants as likely to prevent abuses. Among this study's informants – mostly migrants from Arabic speaking countries – smuggling was not just about profiting because the smuggler (muharrib) was not necessarily driven only by material gain. The practice of smuggling involved smugglers restricting their margin of profit, using good-quality boats, and treating their customers with dignity. In the case of minors on the move, informants reported that smugglers are often chosen by virtue of their reputation as trusted and reliable guardians who care for the needs of the children and protect them against the risks present in the journey, while escorting them to their destination or the next stop toward their destination. Any conduct deviating from these standards of service would be

considered reprehensible and even immoral. More often than smugglers' individual actions, the establishment and enforcement of border controls and the reduction of channels for legal entry increase migrant minors' likelihood of being abused and exploited, even if traveling within groups with whom they share kinship and ethnic ties. Syrian minors for example reported that the inability to overcome border controls or to complete stages of their journeys had led them to accept work along the route under dangerous and exploitative conditions, or even to join smuggling networks to work off their fees (Achilli, 2018; Achilli et al. 2017; see also ICMPD, 2015).

Policy implications

Empirical evidence collected among minors on the move along the Eastern Mediterranean corridor shows that smuggling networks are deeply enmeshed within migratory flows and in community practices of human security. Therefore, the eradication of smuggling organizations without addressing the causes leading to migration may prove difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, one of the main conclusions of our study was that what is often framed as exploitation by protection agencies often constitutes conscious and willing acts on the part of "victims" to facilitate their own mobility and improve their quality of life. In this context, more stringent border policies and practices are doomed to fail young people on the move: they simply bolster the very phenomena – human smuggling and trafficking – they are intended to fight.

Elsewhere, scholars have argued how a truly effective answer to human smuggling would require the EU and its state members to concentrate on reducing "demand" for smuggling services more than curbing "supply." (Achilli, 2015, 2018; see also Mandic and Simpson, 2017). Accordingly, the first step to help strengthen protection policies for children on the move is the opening of new channels of legal entry and the reinforcement of already existing ones for asylum seekers—presumably the largest group of people smuggled by sea in Europe. This would translate into the granting of humanitarian visas; the creation of humanitarian corridors between transit countries and Europe; the expansion of European countries' resettlement programmes; and the development of alternative legal routes for migrants and refugees – such as family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programmes, private sponsorships, and labour mobility.¹

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¹ For a complete set of recommendations on the three countries where this research was carried out, see Achilli et al. (2017).

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