
Tackling smuggling in the Balkans: policy lessons

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Across the world, restrictive border security policies are being pursued in an attempt to tackle smuggling yet there is relatively little discussion of the evidence around what actually happens when these policies are enacted.

Shocked by the arrival of some 1.5 million refugees between 2014 and 2015, the European Union (EU) enacted a series of policies to secure its borders and prevent smuggling. These included militarising the land borders in the Balkans, building physical fences and other barriers, launching maritime patrols in the eastern Mediterranean, and detaining smugglers. The enforcement of security along the Western Balkans transit route between 2015 and 2017 was one of the largest multinational efforts

in recent memory, and it offers useful lessons about the effects of such policies.

During this period I jointly conducted a two-year study of the route – from countries of first asylum like Jordan, through transit countries like Turkey, Greece and Serbia, into destination countries such as Germany.¹ The findings of this research offer lessons for other contexts where State institutions are attempting to restrict border movements and prevent smuggling. These include the US–Mexico border wall, Italy’s maritime



UNHCR/Achilleas Zavelis

A man found at the wheel of a boat carrying a group of Syrian refugees crossing the Aegean sea from Turkey is taken into custody by Greek police on the island of Lesbos on suspicion of smuggling.

operations off the Libyan coast, South Africa's immigration crackdowns, and the militarisation of borders across south Asia, including the India–Bangladesh border.

Impact on refugees

The impact of this State enforcement fell mainly on the migrants rather than on the smugglers, who were able to pass their increasing costs and risks onto their refugee clients. For example, prior to 2014, smugglers would regularly accompany refugees on their crossing from the Turkish coast to the Greek islands, afterwards returning to Turkey. Facing growing risk of interception and arrest after 2014, smugglers stopped accompanying refugees, instead giving them a tablet computer, a compass or often nothing more than a gesture in the direction of a light on the horizon to navigate the 24km crossing. Knowing that boats would be apprehended and destroyed, smugglers began using old unreliable vessels to minimise their operating costs, overcrowding dinghies far

beyond their capacities, and increasing the cost of a seat on board. To avoid detection by maritime patrols, boat launches began taking place at night, even in inclement conditions. These adaptations resulted in numerous sinkings and drownings, while smugglers remained safely on dry land.

Furthermore, the increased presence of State security actors – most of whom had been transferred from unrelated departments to fill capacity gaps, and therefore had little or no experience with refugees or border operations – resulted in numerous incidents of confusion among State security actors, or in violence by these actors against refugees who were mistaken for smugglers. For example, to avoid being arrested smugglers began assigning to a refugee the role of navigator; upon arrival on a Greek island this refugee navigator was often mistakenly identified by police as a smuggler and detained. Without training in how to differentiate smugglers from refugees, distinguish different nationalities or understand international

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humanitarian law, police were unequipped to understand these experiences and often kept refugees incarcerated for months or longer, unsure about what to do.

The same trends of shifting risk onto refugee clients were reported on the land part of the Western Balkans route. Where previously smugglers had accompanied refugees, after 2014 they would point refugees in a general direction and tell them to keep walking until they reached a transit city. We spoke to refugees who were unaccompanied for hundreds of kilometres in the wilderness, suffering flu, symptoms of hypothermia, dehydration, poisonous insect bites and exposure to cold. The most severe incidents of shifted risk were from counter-smuggling operations that were surreptitiously delegated by national governments to paramilitary groups who were armed with machetes, firearms, dogs and all-terrain vehicles, violently assaulting refugees that they either misperceived as being 'illegal immigrants' or misidentified as smugglers.

Costs as well as risks increased dramatically: a pre-2014 level of several hundred US dollars per person per border crossing rose to \$10,000 or more after 2017. As these costs spiked, smuggling became a luxury service available only to the wealthiest and best-connected refugees. Elaborate, extremely costly smuggling packages emerged, such as operations involving a yacht and crew, simulating a lavish personal cruise in order to avoid detection by maritime patrols on the lookout for cheap, rigid-hull inflatable dinghies. Other expensive options included fake passports with plane tickets and coaching on how to assume the fake identity.

By the end of 2017, the costs and risks of smuggling had begun to exceed the financial means and risk tolerance of most refugees, reducing the prevalence of smuggling in the Balkans in terms of absolute numbers. Having dodged any real risk, most smugglers simply found other work, living on savings while blending into cities along the route as part-time construction workers, tailors, barbers, traders or money lenders – although often still making approaches to newcomers

to offer a crossing to Greece at the right price. These smuggling networks remained mostly dormant until new pressures emerged to make the risks of the trip relatively lower than the risks of staying in the country of first asylum. For example, as a result of Turkish crackdowns on ethnic Kurds, hundreds of smuggled Kurdish Syrians are now appearing on a weekly basis in Greek cities from Athens to Thessaloniki.

Impact on citizens assisting refugees

Struggling to reach evasive and adaptive smugglers, State institutions also targeted humanitarian NGOs as the first point of intersection between the illicit and licit market activities. Along the Western Balkans route, the most heavily affected were small, local NGOs that have none of the resilience provided by the multi-million dollar budgets or legal offices of larger, international NGOs. For example, on the Greek island of Lesbos authorities were for the most part unable to detain high-level smugglers who managed operations remotely from Turkey while delegating risky work in Greek waters to lower-level operatives. As a result, Greek authorities began pressuring NGOs that were perceived to be facilitating smuggling operations. This included arrests of volunteers for the NGO Emergency Response Centre International for alleged collusion with smugglers in their attempts to prevent drownings of refugees crossing from the Turkish coast.

In Belgrade, Serbia, national policies focused on limiting local NGOs' freedom to operate. For example, one local NGO that reached thousands of refugees, Miksaliste, was required to relocate from its premises near the city's central bus station to a location far less accessible to the refugees who depend on its services. These efforts had the effect of breaking up civil society and limiting local humanitarianism, but did little to disrupt smugglers, who simply adapted to the changes. As an illustration, as the volume of licit non-food aid handouts from NGOs shrank, a booming grey/black-market economy emerged for everything from diapers to tents as smugglers saw

an opportunity to sell items that would previously have been donated to refugees.

'Strategic pre-emption' as an alternative

Rather than trying to shut smugglers down, States might instead offer safer, lower-cost, profit-making migration options in order to draw demand away from illicit actors. This 'strategic pre-emption' policy would mobilise national resources, including private licit businesses like bus companies, to provide transportation options that are safer, more affordable and more reliable than those offered by smugglers, thus creating de facto humanitarian corridors. It is worth considering that the annual budget of the EU's counter-smuggling mission Operation Sophia was \$11.82 million. Meanwhile, smugglers made an estimated \$1.8 billion from refugees in 2015.² Had Germany offered a practical means of reaching Germany (for example, via a \$250 flight, the average cost of a ticket from Istanbul to Frankfurt) alongside its ambiguous promise of asylum, then based on the 600,000 Syrian refugees currently in Germany this would have generated at least \$150 million, equivalent to meeting Operation Sophia operating costs for a decade. These funds might be applied to providing services and protection to other refugees who cannot afford even a reduced cost option for reaching safe countries. Smugglers would be out-competed and lose their revenue stream, preventing smuggling without military or policing efforts, and affording refugees a safe and efficient method for accessing the promised asylum.

Humanitarian organisations as allies

Admittedly, the policy of strategic pre-emption is unlikely to be pursued by any but the most forward-looking and pragmatic of State leaders. A more realistic policy suggestion based on the Western Balkans

route is for State security institutions to see humanitarian civil society as potential allies and, instead of criminalising them, to allow them to provide alternative services. Before the crackdown on humanitarian NGOs in the Balkans, local NGOs were actively providing timely information to refugees on changing border policies; offering safe, temporary overnight accommodation; and sometimes buying bus tickets or other forms of legitimate transportation. In doing so, these local NGOs undercut the smugglers' services. After the closure of humanitarian NGOs, however, refugees had to turn to smugglers to obtain places in safe houses before continuing their journey to northern Europe. Similarly, in Greece's cities, local NGOs often provided cash-based temporary work for refugees; with NGO shutdowns or restrictions on the hiring of migrants, refugees had to turn to the illicit economy, sometimes having to sell narcotics or work as smugglers themselves to make ends meet.

Smuggling networks are adaptive and, like other private enterprises, able to efficiently shift the risks imposed by States onto their consumers. By out-competing smugglers and avoiding criminalising humanitarian organisations, States could reduce demand for smuggling while improving the safety and well-being of refugees and humanitarians alike.

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1. Mandić D and Simpson C (2017) 'Refugees and Shifted Risk: An International Study of Syrian Forced Migration and Smuggling', *International Migration* <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12371>

2. This estimate is based on the 1.8 million migrants that crossed into Europe in 2015 at a low-end estimate of \$1,000 per person. Although a rough approximation, this calculation is sufficient to make a point about policy.



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