

# Refugees and Shifted Risk: An International Study of Syrian Forced Migration and Smuggling

Danilo Mandić\*  and Charles M. Simpson\*\*

## ABSTRACT

The role of smuggling in forced migration has been a leading policy challenge of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East. This study investigates how anti-smuggling government policies have shaped migratory risks for Syrian refugees in five countries: Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Serbia and Germany. Original evidence from in-depth interviews (n=123), surveys (n=100), expert interviews (n=75) and ethnography reveal that government anti-smuggler policies have: (a) endangered Syrian refugees by shifting risk from smugglers to their clients; (b) distorted refugees' perceptions of risk, and; (c) decreased refugees' confidence in government representatives while increasing dependence on smugglers. These data are unique in scope and topic, expanding the existing literature with an emphasis on understudied experiences *during* migration. The paper concludes with a policy recommendation that acknowledges the reality of smugglers' role in forced migrants' decisions, offering a pragmatic alternative of strategic pre-emption of smugglers.

## INTRODUCTION

A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Omar & Wohlfeld, 2015) report on migrant smuggling concluded that “the response of European governments to the increasing problems of human trafficking and smuggling [is] part of the problem, not the solution.” Such a response, it continued ominously, was “ending the right of asylum in Europe” as such (Morrison and Crosland, 2000, p.1). This was written in 2000.

Fifteen years later, a record wave of refugees deluged the Balkan Route, revealing how robust migrant smugglers are against attempts to shut them down. Government responses have not only failed to adapt to evolving migrant-smuggler dynamics, but have seemingly become even more flawed (Amnesty International, 2015; Guild et al., 2016). While the need to understand smugglers' role in migration has increased, studies addressing smuggler-migrant dynamics by *asking* refugees about their experiences are rare and limited. Particularly, there is limited knowledge on how Syrian refugees in the migration wave of 2013-6 engaged in risk through smuggling, and specifically what effect current policies since March 2016 have had on this interaction. Government-funded surveys and interview-based approaches often avoid the question of smuggling, and are compromised by the extreme caution Syrians exercise in speaking to officials, especially while still in transit. Reports such as those by the Missing Migrants Project (IOM, 2014, 2016) addressing the effects of smuggling networks and anti-smuggler policies on migration outcomes are precious but rare.

---

\* Harvard University

\*\* Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies

This study is a contribution to this urgent research agenda. To shed light on the role of smugglers in refugee risk-taking, as well as the effects of anti-smuggler policies, we present original data from an international sample of Syrian refugees on the Balkan Route. We find that counter-smuggling efforts have shifted the risk from smugglers to refugees, heightened misperception among migrants, and weakened refugee trust in government representatives while increasing refugee dependence on smugglers. Based on these findings, we propose a policy recommendation of strategic pre-emption that would recognize the reality of smuggler-refugee dynamics. This policy would reduce risk for refugees, increase states' ability to focus on trafficking, and divert migrant finances away from smugglers toward state actors.

## THE RISKS OF MIGRANT SMUGGLING

Before elucidating research methods, findings and implications, it is worth discussing the existing theoretical framework surrounding migrant risk, including the on-going debates pertaining to types of risk, agency, and risk perception. The complexity of decision-making involved in forced migration and the frequent lack of differentiation between refugee and non-forced migration dynamics in the literature requires some clarification of terms used in this article, and specification of the point of interaction between this article and existing thinking on the topic.

### Theorizing migrant risk

In their review of six theoretical approaches to risk in migration, Williams and Baláz (2012) find that risk is under-theorized in general, but especially understudied in forced migration contexts and during transit. Most explorations of the topic relate to unforced migration (particularly economic migration and labour market risk-taking); do not ask about risk *en route* (but rather about initial migratory decisions, destination country choices, and differences in post-migration assimilation outcomes); and study refugees only in the context of "at risk" constituencies (such as youth) or as sources of societal risk for receiving countries. Much of the debate—concerning how rational or boundedly rational, individual or collective, objective or socially constructed risk is (Williams and Baláz, 2012; p.23)—has not extended to *en route* forced migratory risk. Furthermore, the centrality of trust in mediating risk decisions (Williams and Baláz, 2012; p.24) has not been explored in relation to smugglers, arguably the most trusted and formative inducers of risky refugee behaviours. Finally, migrant risk-taking has not been contextualized regarding smuggler adaptations to anti-smuggler policies.

### Contextualizing agency: mid-level actors

Forced migration scholarship has strived to theorize the decision-making and risk-taking processes of refugees as pro-active agents, not passive objects of macro-level policy (Triandafyllidou, 2017). This agency has been especially neglected in relation to how migrants perceive, relate to, and react to smugglers, producing difficult legal and moral dilemmas (Landry, 2016). The level of choice and consent in refugee smuggling is notoriously ambiguous:

In circumstances in which refugees flee their countries [...] it can be difficult to draw quite such a clear line between choice and coercion [as with other smuggled migrants]. Refugees may not be forced to engage smugglers, but if smuggling represents their only route out of harm's way, it is hardly a voluntary decision (Koser, 2011, p.258).

We do not pretend to resolve this ambiguity. Instead, we clarify how smugglers and anti-smuggler policy-enforcers shape the framework *within which* migrant risk-taking occurs. Regardless of how

“voluntary” the decisions are thought to be, it is valuable to know the extent to which smugglers and government actors shape them.

We suggest, in other words, that the agency of mid-level actors *pressures* migrant agency in counter-intuitive ways (see also Mandic, 2017). In doing so, we do not exonerate law-breakers or reckless risk-takers from responsibility, we merely observe some of the conditions under which such decision-making occurs. Following Castles and Miller (2013), Watters and Nawyn (2013) find the literature lacking in “meso-level” analyses of “the role of intermediate actors such as border guards, immigration officers and smugglers” (p.102):

The hazardous journeys undertaken by forced migrants involve contact with a range of ‘meso’-level actors whose actions may have a critical influence on the migrants [sic] opportunity for safety and well-being. (Watters and Nawyn, 2013)

Below, we conceptualize risk events in three categories to explain how smugglers and state-representatives affect such opportunity—including a variety of policy-relevant outcomes of “safety and well-being,” ranging from detention and loss of resources to injury and death.

Furthermore, we shed light on how the *interaction* of state (e.g. border police) and non-state (e.g. smugglers) meso-actors affects refugees’ range of risks, as well as the knowledge and perception on which decisions are based. Namely, we argue that government anti-smuggler policies and the smugglers’ resulting adaptations encourage refugees to engage in risky behaviour, to misperceive their variety of options, and to deepen their dependence on criminals both for information and services. These outcomes are unintended consequences of well-meaning anti-smuggler policies.

Finally, our approach supplements work on the role of migrant perceptions (including faith-based and spiritual) on decision-making during dangerous journeys from Mexico and Central America (Hagan, 2008); on the effects of different migration management approaches (direct control, deterrence, and dissuasion) on migrant behaviour in African waves into Europe (Carling and Hernández-Carretero, 2011); and on the broader relation of risk to uncertainty in (unforced) migration (Williams and Baláz, 2012). In an important study of African boat migrant risk-taking, Hernández-Carretero and Carling (2012) argue that context-specific reasons – including religion, conceptions of masculinity, and honour – interact to affect decisions. Our contribution is complementary in focusing on factors contributing to risk-taking *en route* (rather than before migration or upon arrival), and on the sources of information and (mis)perceptions of refugees in transit.

## METHODS

Data were collected in sites that constitute key segments of the Balkan Route and capture the transnational dynamics of recent Syrian migration. We draw on original data gathered through in-depth interviewing of refugees (n=123), surveying (n=100), expert interviewing (n=75), and ethnographic observation between January and August 2016 by seven fieldworkers in five countries – Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Serbia and Germany – across 26 sites including formal, informal, and semi-permanent camps, urban spaces, border crossings, and rural settings. The team consisted of four females and three males, including Syrian, Saudi, Serbian, Turkish, German and American nationalities. In Turkey, Serbia and Germany, we matched nationalities with sites whenever possible.

### Instruments and sampling

Three instruments were designed to explore risk-taking by refugees throughout the Route. First, a thorough 50-item in-depth questionnaire emphasized risk events; details of the smuggling experience, including smugglers’ cost, trustworthiness, and extent of the social relationship; and

interactions and perceptions of security and border policies and personnel. Second, a structured, 18-item survey was administered to one hundred Syrian refugees (n=100), and covered quantifiable data including migration dates, costs and circumstances; major events *en route* including deportations, forced returns, deceptions and forced separations; and means of finding a smuggler and evaluations of the smuggling experience. Third, researchers conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 26 refugee sites, selected to maximize the demographic variety of Syrians residing or congregating. The in-depth interviews were our primary instrument, with the surveys and ethnographies complementing the rich texture of the longer conversations.

In pre-screening conversations, we excluded minors and were prepared to exclude cases of severe trauma by training researchers to recognize trauma symptoms, needs, and concerns of vulnerable populations using techniques from the World Health Organization's (WHO) "Psychological first aid: Facilitator's manual for orienting field workers" (WHO 2011) and the National Institute of Health (NIH). Researchers also underwent intensive two-week trainings at Harvard University on dealing with sensitive populations, medical and psychological emergencies, and security protocols in each country. We did not encounter any severe trauma respondents to exclude. All respondents signed a consent form and were debriefed after interviews.

We stressed how critical it was for each researcher to reflect on one's ethnicity, nationality, gender and age in positioning oneself to respondents. Four fieldworkers were fluent in Syrian Arabic dialects, while the remaining three were accompanied by interpreters who were also trained in interview techniques and methodology: 112 in-depth interviews were conducted in Arabic, 9 in English, and 2 in German. Interviewers were allowed unique access relative to government-funded or aid organization studies due to their academic position, and were thus able to openly discuss sensitive or taboo topics including the use of smugglers, attitudes toward security personnel, and causes of perceived risk. To our surprise, respondents were eager to discuss smuggling.

Respondents recounted in detail major decision-making processes and risk events at each step of their journey. To overcome the respondents' fear and suspicion, researchers recruited informants following standard techniques for chain referral sampling of sensitive populations (Waldorf and Biernacki, 1981). Informants were recruited for their knowledge of the field, confidence among potential respondents, and access to sites. During analysis, the position of the researcher and the context of both the interviewee and the site were considered. Gender sensitivities in the field were addressed as follows: (1) female interviewers with salient Arab identity markers almost exclusively interviewed female respondents; and (2) in the rare instances when male interviewers interacted with female respondents, female interlocutors were also present.

### Site selection

The sites within the five countries comprise the Balkan Route that closed in early March 2016, the main path of Syrian forced migration. Germany is a destination country; the rest are bridge countries. We treat Jordan as an early segment of the Route, since approximately 20,000 Syrians joined the Route from Jordan, and some 500,000 more are projected to depart for Europe if they are unable to find jobs in Jordan (Danish Refugee Council, 2016). Respondents were Syrian men and women who fled since 2011, regardless of legal status. None were themselves smugglers. The bulk of the narrated migratory experiences either occurred after March 2016, or included experiences both before and after the Route closing.

Given the diversity of sites and their constituencies, we sought to diversify site selection, ranging from highly regulated camps to urban neighbourhoods (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Sites within each country were selected bearing the following variables in mind:

- Gender ratios, and access to female respondents;
- Economic and legal status;

TABLE 1  
IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW SAMPLE

Country	Research Sites	Expert Interviews (Role/ expertise)	Informants (Main guidance criteria)	Female	Male	TOTAL
Jordan	Rural Mafrag; Mafrag City; Irbid City; Za'atari Camp; Azraq Camp; Amman's Sweilah, Sports City, and University of Jordan, 3 <sup>rd</sup> Circle, and 7 <sup>th</sup> Circle neighbourhoods; Zarqa; Salt	10 (UNHCR representatives, ILO representatives, policy researchers, aid workers, security personnel, local Jordanians in Syrian-dense neighbourhoods)	5 (Gender, socioeconomic status)	17	14	31
Turkey	Ankara; Fatih & Sultanbeyli municipalities in Istanbul; Konak and Sokak in Izmir; Manisa; Dikili; Ayvalik	19 (aid workers, municipal government representatives, a Ministry of Interior representative, UNHCR representatives, policy researchers and Turks in Syrian dense neighbourhoods)	5 (General access, socioeconomic status)	3	7	10
Greece	Lesvos' Moria camp; Athens' Piraeus Port & Skaramangas Camps, Elliniko, Omonia Square & Platia Victoria neighbourhoods; Sakaramangas Camp; three Thessaloniki Camps Softef, Oraiokastro, Stratopedo Anagnostopoulou, Diovata)	5 (aid workers, Greek police, an IOM representative, local Greeks in Syrian-dense neighbourhoods, non-Syrian migrants sharing camp space with Syrians for extended period)	11 (Gender, length of stay in Greece, regional Syrian background)	14	17	31
Serbia	Preševo Camp; Belgrade "Afghan Park"; Horgoš, Subotica, Kelebija; Dimitrovgrad	17 (policy researchers, UNHCR public relations spokesman, Deputy Minister in Ministry with jurisdiction over refugees, aid workers, Security Service official)	4 (Gender, socioeconomic status)	16	15	31
Germany	Berlin; Dusseldorf's Flüchtlingsunterkunft Borbecker Stase Camp; Dortmund; Hamburg; Wiesbaden, Mainz, Castrop-Rauxel; Wilkommen, Falkensee, Kassel;	6 (aid workers, local and state politicians, policy researchers, local Germans in Syrian-dense neighbourhoods)	3 (General access, socioeconomic status, length of stay in Germany)	10	10	20
Total						123

- inhabitants' average duration of stay in the country, and likelihood of further migration;
- Level of military/police/government/NGO regulation;
- Ethnic/national diversity, and intra-Syrian regional diversity;
- Proximity to known smugglers and illegal routes;

To ascertain whether the given cities, camps, settlements, neighbourhoods, etc. were highly skewed in any of these regards, researchers developed relations with local residents and conducted 75 interviews with experts in government, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) sectors working on the refugee crisis. For example, in the Greece subsample, researchers discovered from experts that the Omonia Square neighbourhood of Athens had predominantly recent arrivals still in transit, so we pursued Athens' Elliniko Camp, where migrants had been stationary for a longer period. Similarly, ethnography and expert interviews revealed Bristol Park in Belgrade was primarily populated by single, middle-aged male refugees, while Cigłana Camp in Subotica on the Hungary-Serbia border had a larger population of women and families: sampling was thus balanced across both sites.

Analysis was informed by a range of conditions of each interview including differences between camp and non-camp settings, distance from Syria, presence or absence of aid organization and government representatives, diversity of migrants at each site, interview language, whether or not the refugee was still in transit, recent events like border closures, and the relative safety of the interview site. Each respondent's narrative was considered an equally valuable independent observation regardless of how far they had moved on the Route. The similarities and differences of each country and site were considered allowing interviews to supplement each other and provide a transnational perspective on Balkan Route experiences.

### A note on credibility

Our fieldwork confirmed that criminal smuggling operations often include refugees and other migrants who act as low-level pilots or escorts as well as mid-level recruiters, guides and coordinators of migrant smuggling. Our sample did not include respondents who reported such roles. Fieldworkers encountered such cases outside the sample, and several respondents reported acquaintances or travelling companions playing such roles: piloting boats for money or volunteering to recruit or operate for the smuggler. Our sample, however, includes only the criminals' customers.

Credibility assessments of refugee narratives are notoriously problematic. But the consensus not only in qualitative research but also in certain legal frameworks (Millbank, 2009) is that inconsistencies and exaggerations do not necessarily invalidate refugee testimonies. Rather, they are normal given familiar habits of denial and avoidance among traumatized constituencies. It is therefore very probable that refugee respondents *underreported* risk events. We nevertheless excluded from our data contradictory, unrealistic or manipulative recollections of migratory experiences. This includes recollections that changed after follow-up questions about *who* was behind risk events (e.g. if respondents appeared to "exonerate" themselves by changing their story when asked to specify who decided to hire a smuggler).

## RESULTS

Our central finding is that government-induced risk events and *shifted risk events*, by which government anti-smuggler policy harms refugees, are much more frequent causes of harm than smuggler-induced risk events. Much of what states do in repressing smugglers shifts risk to the refugees as a harmful, often lethal, unintended consequence. In some cases, this shifted risk is a deliberate,

if unspoken, intention of anti-migrant policies that are portrayed as anti-smuggler policies. Furthermore, smugglers play a central role not merely as black market service providers, but as trusted sources of information and guidance inducing risky migratory decisions.

### Risk events

In-depth interviews documented 409 *risk events*, experiences that signified a risk to the security, health, well-being or life of the respondent (witnessed risk events experienced by others, including family travelling companions, were excluded). Following Durand and Massey's methodology for cataloguing migrant experiences for the Mexico Migration Project (Durand and Massey 2004, p.3-6), we coded reported behaviours *en route* (i.e. after the first internal migration within Syria and before arrival in Germany, when applicable) and compiled an individual migratory history for each respondent. For each event on the compilation, we noted what the outcome was (e.g. injury), where and when it happened, and—if either a smuggler or government representative was involved—the circumstances leading up to the event. Risk events were reported migratory experiences bounded temporally to a single day (usually a single hour). We did not treat prolonged detention as multiple risk events, for example; nor did we code an arrest immediately followed by deportation as multiple risk events.

The catalogue of risk events included: violent incidents, arrests, detentions, deportations, forceful separations, injuries, theft of urgently needed resources or documents, hospitalizations, and being involuntarily sent into war or other life-threatening situations. We included all apparent instances of law breaking, whether by the refugees themselves (e.g. illegal border crossing) or by state officials (e.g. border police beating respondents). We conservatively excluded events inside Syria itself: hunger, weather-related difficulties, disease, abuse by non-state and non-smuggler actors (e.g. abuse and fraud by private citizens), inconsequential migration setbacks, and testimonies with apparent contradictions. Likewise, risk events due to pre-migratory conditions, not caused but catalysed by experiences *en route* (e.g. pre-existing injuries exacerbated by a boat ride), were excluded. Table 2 categorizes the risk events, an exhaustive count of policy-relevant experiences that characterize respondents' journeys.

Our operationalization of risk events draws on standard practice of cataloguing comparable "trauma events" with instruments such as the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (for an application to refugees in transit on the Balkan Route, see Vukčević, Momirović & Purić, 2016). Such coding routinely distinguishes between "smuggler" and "police" trauma events, but without contextualization or attention to second-order effects of anti-smuggler policy (Vukčević, Dobrić & Purić, 2014; 54-66). Our risk event cataloguing is analogous but narrower: we focus on experiences that (a) involved risk-taking behaviour on the part of the migrant; (b) were temporally bounded; (c) had a

TABLE 2  
RISK EVENT COUNT, CODED FROM INTERVIEWS (N=123)

	Government-Induced Risk Events	Smuggler-Induced Risk Events	Shifted Risk Event	TOTAL
Jordan	41	13	38	92
Turkey	7	4	10	21
Greece	55	38	64	157
Serbia	26	17	42	85
Germany	25	15	14	54
TOTAL	154	87	168	409

Source: Interview data.



salient connection to smugglers, government policies, or both; and (d) were overt behavioural occurrences and activities, not subjective experiences. Respectively, examples of cases that were thereby excluded include: (a) disease; (b) prolonged lack of food or water; (c) migrant-on-migrant injury or hostility from the local civilian population; (d) suicidal contemplation and other traumatic symptoms. Finally, our in-depth interview method allowed for much greater nuance and contextualization of “risk events” than standard survey instruments allow for “trauma events.”

We proceed to code the risk events into three distinct categories:

- 1) *Government-induced risk events*, when the experience was primarily due to government policy, as when a border patrol officer deports refugees to a more dangerous site than where they previously were, or when a soldier confiscates their money before detaining them.
- 2) *Smuggler-induced risk events*, when the experience is primarily due to smuggler acts, as when a trafficker deceives them over prices or conditions, or coerces them into staying at a safe house at gunpoint.
- 3) *Shifted risk events*, when the experience is a result of government repression or policy against smugglers which in practice puts the refugees at risk, as when a smuggler puts migrants on boats without pilots, or when police arrest refugees misidentified as smugglers.

The third category – of shifted risk events – was crucial and prevalent. These were unintended consequences of anti-smuggler repression. A total of 168 shifted-risk events outnumbered both government- and smuggler-induced risk events (154 and 87, respectively). In all but one country sub-sample (Germany), shifted risk events outnumbered smuggler-induced risk events: by more than double in Jordan, Turkey and Serbia. Remarkably, even in Jordan – where migration was restricted across the Syria-Jordan border and had relatively less smuggler repression – the risk events caused by anti-smuggler measures (38) were almost as frequent as government-induced risk events (41). This is largely due to repression of smuggling in and out of Jordanian refugee camps, or between them.

Qualitatively, the shifted-risk events were as risky as and often riskier than the other two categories. Frequent examples included: being deported (from Turkey or Jordan) back to Syria for engaging a smuggler; taking circuitous deadly routes instead of safe ones in order to avoid police patrols; massive spikes (by factors of 100) in prices due to increased government crackdown on smugglers, resulting in forced family separations where only one family member could afford to continue travelling; being arrested for suspected smuggling, including during *legal* crossings; and avoidance of urgently-needed medical attention for fear of being misidentified as a smuggler and detained.

### **Shifting risk to refugees: the consequences of smuggler repression**

The single most deadly shifted risk category was unaccompanied illegal migration by boats without pilots, vehicles without smuggler guides, and on foot. As government repression of smugglers is perceived (accurately or not) to increase, smugglers avoid arrest by letting refugees migrate alone, or with an untrained driver or guide. Over two dozen respondents had near-death experiences because smugglers declined to accompany them. This was most notable on the Mediterranean, where government policies induced smugglers to use cheaper boats and unreliable engines (for one-way trips), without pilots or guides, late at night via untested routes. This resulted in confusion, pierced blow-up boats, dead engines, drifting at sea, severe cold and near drowning.

On land, refugees seeking to leave Greece and Serbia were often directed to walk alone for hundreds of kilometres without guidance. Border crossings where smuggler repression was highest (e.g. Serbia-Hungary) accounted for deadlier risks than crossings where repression was relatively weaker (e.g. pre-border closure Syria-Jordan). One respondent reported making the same illegal crossing from Macedonia into Serbia twice: first, *without* a smuggler guide (resulting in beatings



and police robbery before deportation), then after government repression of smugglers temporarily subsided, *with* a smuggler guide on the same path (resulting in successful crossing).

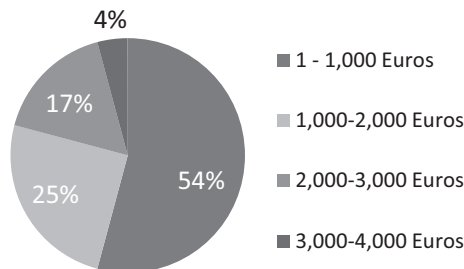
Several other respondents reported their smugglers choosing to camp for the night in forests, resulting in harm inflicted by rural vigilantes targeting migrants – such as in Bulgaria or Hungary – and other risks including wild animals or injuries sustained from extensive walking on rough terrain in the dark. Multiple respondents reported health problems ranging from flu symptoms to dehydration to poisonous insect bites that went unreported and untreated due to fear of repercussions from security personnel. One respondent in Belgrade, Serbia, reported an elderly female in his travelling group who went against guidance from their smuggler and the travelling group in order to turn herself in at a police station so she could receive medical treatment for flu-like symptoms, calorie-deficiency, dehydration, and exhaustion. Her decision may have saved her life, but resulted in the group being detained in Hungary and returned to Serbia. Another respondent described her daughter being taken by her smuggler: she chose not to report the incident to police for fear of being deported because of her contact with smugglers. As a result she was permanently separated from her daughter, but hoped to re-join her later on the migrant route.

In sum, a significant subset of risk events was the unintended consequences of policies aimed at smugglers. Whether these policies were genuinely aimed at countering smuggling and trafficking or simply public relations masks for policies aimed fundamentally at deterring migration, the outcome of shifted risk to affect refugees is in evidence. Bluntly put: we must begin to think of anti-smuggler policies as a rejection of Europe's proclaimed humanitarian responsibilities, not a tool for protecting smugglers as is publically decried (IOM, 2014).

### The role of smugglers: cost, trust and guidance

Figure 2 presents a troubling finding for policymakers. Comparing refugees who had vulnerable travelling companions (children or elderly, non-exclusive) with those travelling without vulnerable individuals, we see that smugglers benefit disproportionately from travelling units with at least one minor or one companion over 65. While respondents without vulnerable travelling companions paid 1,385 Euros on average per segment of journey, those with children paid 1,760 Euros and those with elderly paid as high as 2,156 Euros. More importantly, it seems that refugees in this category (which is presumably less likely to pose a security risk) are willing and able to spend much more

FIGURE 1  
AVERAGE SMUGGLING COST PER INDIVIDUAL PER SEGMENT OF JOURNEY TO EUROPE



Notes: Cost responses converted from USD, Syrian Pounds, Jordanian Dinars, etc. Segment of journey refers to discrete smuggling trip that either had unique transportation means (bus, van, boat) or unique smuggler organization or was preceded/followed by prolonged immobility before or after other smuggling trips.

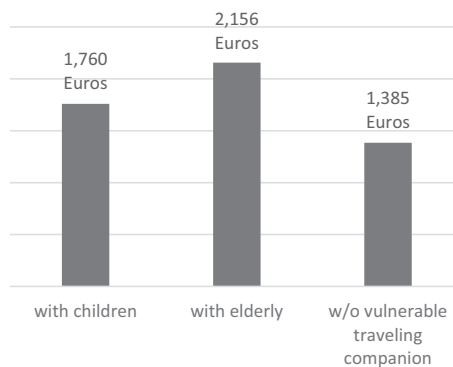
money on smugglers than single military-age men, a category widely associated (for good reason or not) with security risk. Figure 1

In contrast to border security practice, which often conflates smugglers and traffickers, the smugglers interacting with our respondents were primarily *not* traffickers. Trafficking – operationalized as any prolonged social relationship with the smuggler involving coercion, deception or any non-monetary compensation for services – was rare. As Table 3 notes, only 7.9 per cent of survey respondents reported being asked by smugglers to engage in any labour before or after a voyage. Furthermore, reported trafficking experiences were *relatively* non-coercive. The coercive ones were nonviolent: theft, using indirect routes to increase costs, cheating migrants financially during the journey, failing to keep promises on dates and routes, threatening to turn them around mid-journey, and misrepresenting conditions of travel. The most common trafficking abuses were deceptions over life vests and bus or boat capacity. The exceptions (notably, a kidnapping of a respondent’s daughter by the smuggler, and a forced detention at gunpoint) were rare indeed.

Equating trafficking and smuggling – as government policies sometimes do – is highly misleading. The overwhelming majority of smuggler activities in our data involve minor deception and coercion, no long-term relationship beyond the immediate money-for-transit exchange, and nonviolent, non-lethal risks. Indeed, more survey respondents reported experiencing deception at the hands of police, soldiers and other government officials (36.6%) than at the hands of smugglers (26.8%). Further, more respondents reported being forcefully separated from family or travelling companions by government officials (17.6%) than by smugglers (12.2%).

Finally, respondents overwhelmingly rated their criminal service-providers highly and expressed considerable sympathy, trust and identification with smugglers. In-depth interviewing asked about smuggler experience in terms of honesty, prices, service delivery, and ability to manage safety. In the survey, 73.7 per cent were “very satisfied” with their experience with the smuggler, only 5 per cent were “dissatisfied” and 11.4 per cent “very dissatisfied.” Several respondents on the 1-5 scale of smuggler satisfaction indicated “10.” Several of those indicating “1” clarified that it referred to their Greece-Turkey smuggler, while the smugglers for subsequent legs of their journey deserved “5.” Figure 3

FIGURE 2  
AVERAGE SMUGGLING COST PER INDIVIDUAL PER SEGMENT OF JOURNEY TO EUROPE WITH  
AND WITHOUT VULNERABLE TRAVELING COMPANIONS



Notes: Cost responses converted from USD, Syrian Pounds, Jordanian Dinars, etc. Segment of journey refers to discrete smuggling trip that either had unique transportation means (bus, van, boat) or unique smuggler organization or was preceded/followed by prolonged immobility before or after other smuggling trips.

TABLE 3  
TRAFFICKING, RISK AND MAJOR EVENTS

	"Yes" Response Percentage
Did the Smuggler Ask You to Engage in Any Labour Before or After Your Trip?	7.9%
Did you experience [the following] while crossing borders on your journey?	
Forced Detention (Being held somewhere against your will)	48.8%
Forced Return (Being returned across a border after crossing it)	46.3%
Did you experience deception at the hands of [the following]?	
By Smuggler (Smuggler gave you false information about where you are, where you are going, or anything important to your movement)	26.8%
By police, soldiers, any government officials (Some policeman, soldier or government official gave you false information about where you are, where you are going, or anything important to your movement)	36.6%
Did you experience forced separation . . .	
By Smuggler (Being separated from family or traveling companions against your will)	12.2%
By Government Official (Being separated from family or traveling companions against your will)	17.6%

Note: Response formats were Y/N

Source: Survey data.

Smugglers are indispensable “middle men” in maintaining and perpetuating migrant networks and social capital. Finances aside, smugglers are crucial sources of information and guidance towards risky migratory events. Interview respondents trusted smugglers far more than government representatives, a product of experiencing more traumatic events at the hands of the latter, such as being detained, forcibly returned, or beaten. To attempt to navigate the uncertainty pertaining to risk along the Route, refugees based major decisions about crossing borders or moving within a bridge country on information and guidance from smugglers, not government representatives. Such advice is often not disinterested or accurate, but Syrians act on it for lack of alternatives.

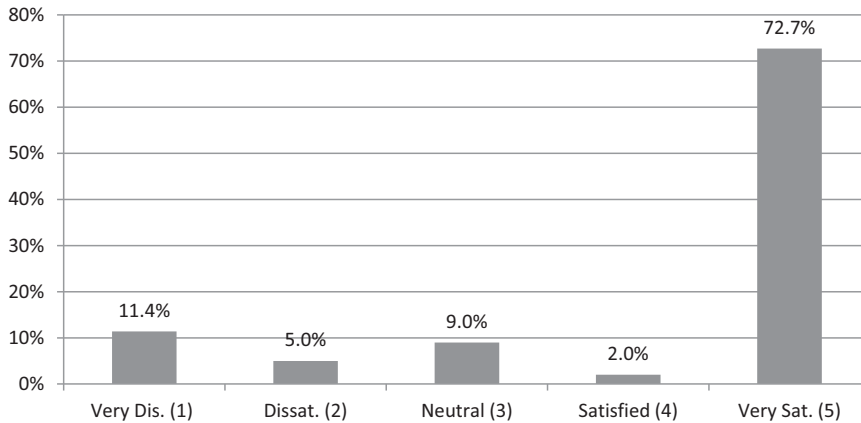
A pernicious example of smugglers acting as *de facto* information bureaux concerns border-crossing alternatives. Refugees typically have several border options for illegal migration to their destination country. Smugglers routinely encourage them to make irrational choices in this regard. Drawing solely on smugglers’ information, respondents took unnecessary, careless risks to legal status, health and life because of mistaken evaluations of which border is safer to cross or what legal crossing requires. The Hungarian-Serbian border, for instance, was notoriously the most militarized in Europe: respondents were robbed, beaten, attacked by watchdogs and told to memorize the name of the country so as not to return, before being sent back to Serbia. Yet refugees consistently preferred attempting crossing there instead of the far safer and less conspicuous crossings at the Serbia-Croatia border because of smuggler information that it was a preferable option. According to an authoritative UNHCR expert interview, smugglers profit from such behaviour because they can double-charge returnees for repeated attempts.

### Risk misperception

A recurring theme of the in-depth interview testimonies regarding risk events was a pervasive sense of confusion regarding unstable and inconsistent border policies along the Route. Refugees regularly undertook risk based on obsolete, inaccurate or partial information and rumours from

FIGURE 3  
EVALUATIONS OF SMUGGLERS

"On a Scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), how satisfied were you with your smuggler?"



Note: Several respondents (whose responses were included here) took the opportunity to evaluate two separate smugglers, recording a "1" but noting their satisfaction with the subsequent smuggler.

Source: Survey data.

smugglers, recruiters, drivers, pilots, restaurant owners, other migrants and exploitative locals in bridge countries. The relative distrust of information from government sources was notable compared to the weight given to smuggler advice.

Refugees often recognized their own ignorance, trusting that smugglers had better situational awareness and would make proper migration choices on their behalf. For example, a refugee in Serbia planning to proceed to Hungary perceived the border crossing's risk by drawing on social media postings from migrants who had travelled on this path several weeks earlier. However, after hearing that new border closures on this path had made these accounts obsolete, the respondent instead trusted the more up to date guidance of smugglers he encountered in Belgrade. The greater the anxiety, it seemed, the greater the panicked reliance on smugglers who in turn suggested urgent movement for a price "before it's too late." In other instances, by luck refugees passed through a border undisturbed due to limited security personnel – they then passed along information about the supposed safety of that crossing and recommended a smuggler. Those following in their footsteps were then surprised to encounter heavy police presence at that crossing. Smugglers, for their part, encouraged their customers' misperceptions when profit was at stake.

Furthermore, respondents reported convoluted movements that made an accurate perception of risk even more difficult. Most migratory journeys were *not* linear: they included internal migration within states (between camps, parks, towns, cities, border crossings); backwards migration along the Route (to re-join family or fellow travellers); and lateral movements to other transit countries (e.g. to Bulgaria and back) based on beliefs – mostly inaccurate – that those countries would be more permissive. Refugees even reported experiencing different risks at the same points because border patrols, camp management, and NGO aid administration would erratically change both their *de jure* policies and their *de facto* willingness to implement those policies over time. Across countries, many policies were indistinguishable.

Accordingly, risk events were not exclusively experienced at international border crossings, but significantly during movement within countries. Risk events did not increase with the distance travelled from Syria or with proximity to a destination country, as one might have expected. Rather, they multiplied with the extent of internal migration, shifts of border management policies, and the smugglers' adaptive tactics. Tremendous misperceptions were noted regarding all three.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATION

These findings promote a policy of strategic pre-emption (related to "practical protection," IOM, 2014) that could directly address what are recognized to be two central weaknesses of the current system: (a) the infringement of asylum seekers' rights under international law, particularly the principle of *non-refoulement* (Rais, 2016); and (b) negative humanitarian outcomes, particularly rates of drownings in the Mediterranean and health/injury risks to migrants (Omar & Wohlfeild, 2015; Colantes-Celadorn & Juncos, 2012).

Balkan Route states have failed to eradicate migrant smuggling networks for decades. Repressing them is ineffective; ignoring them is imprudent. Therefore, the central dilemma is not whether to tolerate smuggling or not in any absolute sense, but rather how to *minimize* its social damage by intelligent, realistic regulation and co-existence. Having acknowledged criminal robustness, pragmatic policies must seek to create a framework by which the smuggling mechanism is made safer and less deadly. Accordingly, we recommend strategic pre-emption of smuggling – a policy proposal applicable well outside this regional context. Even though the Route is deemed closed, historical experience since the collapse of Yugoslavia indicates that smuggling will persist. Regions with similar dynamics account for global migrant flows.

### Strategic pre-emption

As our findings have demonstrated, border management policies are characterized by inconsistency. The resulting volatility of expectations that refugees deal with undermines refugees' confidence in government representatives while inflating smuggler credibility, and simultaneously increases risk to migrants. In their understandable rush to persecute traffickers, governments have endangered refugees and unnecessarily empowered criminals financially and logistically. Anti-smuggler policies have encouraged abusive practices, raised smuggler prices, made routes deadlier, and increased risk and cost for vulnerable refugee populations.

This requires a shift of emphasis from *repression* of smugglers to *strategic pre-emption* of smugglers (IOM, 2014). We note that Balkan Route criminal networks have robust roots (Hajdinjak, 2002; Lewis, 1998), and that arms and drug traffickers overlap significantly with the criminal structures that enable migrant trafficking. Although outright repression would be preferable in principle, it has been chronically unsuccessful in practice (Heller and Pezzani, 2016; Obokata et al., 2016; Krasniqi, 2016). Thus, instead of increasing cost and risk, strategic pre-emption would better serve stated European objectives more efficiently, cheaply and safely.

Concretely, three interventions are vital:

- (1) Nuclear families with vulnerable travelling companions – i.e. children and the elderly, who are routinely classified as High Priority Cases anyway – should be offered government transportation at prices below smuggler market costs. These state-sponsored, for-profit plane, train and bus opportunities should be offered regardless of legal status and presumed asylum outcome. If redirected toward states, the funds that this vulnerable category of refugees is currently giving to smugglers could easily finance multiple return-flight tickets and costs of security vetting procedures. Meso-level private and public actors already work

collaboratively to this end, including regional bus companies, train operators, border police checkpoints, and municipal governments along the Balkan Route. However, these smuggling-facilitative actions are currently conducted *ad hoc* and under the table. These actors and the refugees who rely on them would be able to function more efficiently and safely with explicit approval and guidance from representatives of Balkans Route governments and organs of the EU. Further, INGOs that regularly interact with and are trusted by refugees should be given regular, timely information about changing border policies by national governments, and be legally protected when facilitating information exchanges between smugglers and other refugees, particularly at transit hubs like border towns, ports, and train and bus stations.

- (2) Anti-smuggler repression that shifts risk from smugglers to refugees – above all on the perilous Mediterranean routes between Greece and Turkey and other bridge country borders – should be eliminated. Police and military patrols must not discourage low-level smugglers from *accompanying* their customers on foot or as drivers of cars, vans, trucks and boats, as they are currently doing. Secondly, refugee association with smugglers should be decriminalized and must not jeopardize asylum seeker status or access to resources. By redirecting resources from these unrefined and counterproductive anti-smuggler measures, law-enforcement can instead concentrate resources and efforts to more effective policies against traffickers: raiding safe houses where traffickers engage in abuse and violence; counter-corruption measures aimed at bribery among police and border officials; and focusing on unaccompanied minors and sexual trafficking in particular (not generic illegal crossings).
- (3) Actors responsible for the detention of smuggler recruiters, guides, and other low-level criminals – who are in most frequent contact with refugees – should be trained in differentiating traffickers from smugglers. Instead of sweeping enforcement efforts that conflate trafficking with smuggling, these actors should be delegated ground-level authority in determining who is a *relatively* dangerous threat instead of a nonviolent low-level provider of migrant services who does not pose a threat. These include a range of practitioners including personnel in the Greek and Turkish Coast Guards, Frontex deployments, bridge country customs and migration offices, municipal police forces of towns along the Balkan Route, and security interviewers. Training should include added appreciation for linguists and interpreters – including refugees recruited as *ad hoc* translators – who should be given particular influence in making these differentiations, as these individuals regularly have the most direct access to actionable, nuanced, and individual-level information on the actions of smugglers and traffickers. This training effort may be particularly effective at government-regulated camps, where many workers and volunteers are *already* positioned to make informed distinctions in this regard, but do not feel they have the authority or incentive to take action. With basic training, these individuals can be empowered as vital sources of information and guidance.

By supplementing existing deportation transportation means with predictable, sanctioned means to destination countries for prices below smuggler rates, and by improving differentiation of threatening traffickers from non-threatening smuggling actors, significant funds would be redirected from smugglers to governments, risk events can be decreased, and the most lucrative criminal operations would be dealt a serious blow. By easing repressive measures in the domain of shifted risks, governments can redirect resources to the more important areas of trafficking and violence by smugglers, and decrease deadly shifted risk among refugees. Finally, by sensitizing those in charge of identifying smugglers to the *relative* differences between smugglers and traffickers, anti-smuggler resources can be directed more efficiently and with fewer unintended consequences.

These recommendations are admittedly provocative. But the evidence suggests that the costs of the *status quo* approach, both to state security and to refugees, are enormous. We fear that these costs



outweigh the purported threat of “endorsing” smuggling. Instead, the proposed policies would simply make use of an existing network and logistical infrastructure. Smugglers, after all, function with extensive support of bribed border and customs officers, police and others. Most governments actively recruit suspected smugglers, often tolerating their activity for information and leverage. Without condoning illegal border passage, strategic pre-emption would (a) *recognize* the existence of this phenomenon, including the formative role smugglers play in determining outcomes; and (b) *mitigate the harmful effects* of refugee smuggling by aligning criminal operations and official objectives.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC POLICY

There is an understandable fear that a strategic pre-emption policy amounts to embracing crime. Our data suggests this may be a misplaced concern, and that the *status quo* is far more dangerous than the proposed alternative. An apt analogy would be free needle and syringe programmes to combat drug addiction. Superficial critics are quick to accuse such measures of endorsing narcotraffickers and fuelling addiction. But the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that such measures curb drug disease (Vlahov and Junge, 1998); far from discrediting policy objectives, they simply achieve them with less harm. Analogously, strategic pre-emption of refugee smugglers would decrease undesirable outcomes of migrant death tolls, higher costs, smuggler-related violence, trafficking, and risky migratory behaviour, while empowering governments to implement stated migration and deportation policies more cheaply and efficiently.

In pragmatic drug policy, governments in effect declare: “We condemn and criminalize this practice. But *if* you are engaging in it, please take the following steps.” Pragmatic policymakers working on illegal refugee flows would be well advised to adopt a similar posture. The evidence presented suggests that failure to do so will advance the suffering of refugees, not smugglers.

## NOTE

- 1 As fieldworkers since 2013 know, a longitudinal study of refugees as they move on the Route was unfeasible due to legal and security obstacles. It became especially unrealistic given the volatility of border closures along the Route in late 2014 and 2015. Our research design is a pragmatic alternative. Regarding ethnographical, religious and gender matching of interviewers with subjects: we approached it as a practical advantage, but *not* an indispensable source of validity. We follow Waters (2009) in dismissing the notion that validity is necessarily increased by shared interviewer-subject identities. Insisting on Syrian-only interviewers to study Syrian refugees is as absurd as the notion that “only Blacks should study blacks” (p.363). Such an approach is methodologically crippling, and theoretically unnecessary: “an insider and an outsider will not see exactly the same things or interpret things exactly the same, but that does not make one perspective automatically invalid” (*Ibid*).

## REFERENCES

- Amnesty International  
 2015 *Catastrophic Moral Failure as Rich Countries Leave bills of Refugees to Cruel and Uncertain Fates*, AI Press Release, London.
- Castles, S., and Miller, M.  
 2013 *The Age of Migration*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Carling, J., and Hernández-Carretero, M.  
 2011 “Protecting Europe and protecting migrants? Strategies for managing unauthorised migration from Africa”, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13(1).

- Collantes-Celadorn, G., and Juncos, Ana E.  
2012 "The EU and border management in the Western Balkans: Preparing for European integration or safeguarding EU external borders?", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 12(2): 201–220.
- Danish Refugee Council  
2016 *Summary of Regional Migration Trends. Middle East*, Copenhagen.
- Durand, J., and Massey, D.  
2004 "What we learned from the Mexican migration project" in *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Grech, O., and Wohlfeld, M.  
2016 "Managing migration in the Mediterranean: Is the EU Failing to Balance State Security, Human Security, and Human Rights?." *OSCE Yearbook 2015*. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.
- Guild, E., Carrera, S., Vosyliute, S., Groenendijk, K., Brouwer, E., Bigo, D., Jeandesboz, J., and Martin-Mazé, M.  
2016 *Internal Border Controls in the Schengen Area: is Schengen Crisis-Proof?* Directorate General for Internal Policies, European Parliament, Brussels.
- Hernández-Carretero, M., and J. Carling  
2012 "Beyond 'Kamikaze Migrants': Risk taking in West African boat migration to Europe", *Peace Research Institute, Oslo*, 71(4): 407–416.
- Hagan, J., Eschbach, K., and Rodriguez, N.  
2008 "U.S. deportation policy, family separation, and circular migration", *International Migration Review*, 42(1): 64–88.
- Hajdinjak, M.  
2002 *Smuggling in Southeast Europe: The Yugoslav wars and the development of regional criminal networks in the Balkans*, Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine.
- Heller, C., and Pezzani, L.  
2016 *Ebbing and Flowing: The EU's Shifting Practices of (Non-) Assistance and Bordering in a Time of Crisis*, Zone Books, New York.
- International Organization for Migration  
2014 *Fatal Journeys. Tracking Lives Lost during Migration*, International Organization for Migration, Geneva.  
2016 *Fatal Journeys: Volume 2. Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants*, International Organization for Migration, Geneva.
- Koser, K.  
2011 "The smuggling of refugees", in Kyle, D. and Koslowski, R. (Eds), *Global human smuggling: Comparative perspectives*, John Hopkins University Press.
- Krasniqi, K.  
2016 "Organized crime In The Balkans", *European Scientific Journal*, 12(19).
- Landry, R.  
2016 "The humanitarian smuggling of refugees: Criminal offence or moral obligation?", Working Paper Series No.119, *Refugee Studies Centre*, University of Oxford, October.
- Lewis, R.  
1998 *Drugs, war and crime in the post-Soviet Balkans. The New European Criminology—Crime and Social Order in Europe*, London/New York: 216–229.
- Mandić, D.  
2017 "Trafficking and Syrian refugee smuggling: Evidence from the Balkan Route", *Social Inclusion*, 5(2): 28–38.
- Millbank, J.  
2009 "The ring of truth": A case study of credibility assessment in particular social group refugee determinations. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, p.een040.
- Morrison, J., and Crosland, B.  
2000 *The Trafficking and Smuggling of Refugees: The End Game in European Asylum Policy?* UNHCR Evaluation and Policy Unit, Geneva.
- National Institute of Health.  
2017 "Protecting Human Research Participants", *NIH Training*, Washington, D.C.

- Obokata, T., Boskovic, A., and Radovic, N.  
2016 "Serbia's action against transnational organised crime", *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice*, 24(2–3): 151–175.
- Rais, M.  
2016 "European union readmission agreements", *Forced Migration Review*, 51: 45–46.
- Triandafyllidou, A.  
2017 "Beyond irregular migration governance: Zooming in on migrants' agency", *European Journal of Migration and Law*, 19(1): 1–11.
- Vlahov, D., and Junge, B.  
1998 "The role of needle exchange programs in HIV prevention", *Public Health Reports*: 113.
- Vukčević, M., Dobrić, J., and Purić, D.  
2014 "Istraživanje o Mentalnom Zdravlju Tražioca Azila u Srbiji", UNHCR Srbija (Septembar).
- Vukčević, M., Momirović, J., and Purić, D.  
2016 "Adaptation of Harvard Trauma Questionnaire for working with refugees and asylum seekers in Serbia", *Psihologija*, 49(3): 277–299.
- Waldorf, D., and Biernacki, P.  
1981 "Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling", *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2): 141–163.
- Waters, M.  
2009 *Black identities: West Indian immigrant dreams and American realities*, Harvard University Press.
- Watters, C., and Nawyn, S.  
2013 Refugees and forced migrants, *Routledge International handbook of migration studies*, Routledge: 97–118.
- Williams, A., and Baláz, V.  
2012 "Migration, risk, and uncertainty: Theoretical perspectives", *Population, Space and Place*, 18(2): 167–180.
- World Health Organization  
2011 *Psychological First Aid: Guide for Field Workers*, Geneva.