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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Iranians' Unauthorized Mobility Projects to Europe: A Digital Ethnography of Smuggling and Solidarity

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ABSTRACT:

In the last decades, Iran has witnessed an increasing development of the culture of migration due to several political, social, and economic causes. This has led to the widening and specialization of the corresponding migration industry, with the role of the so-called digital infrastructure evolving in creative and innovative ways.

Relying on several months of digital ethnography on virtual platforms used by Persian-speaker individuals to share information about border crossing, this paper aims to shed light on some under-represented strategies and practices of self-determination of Iranian citizens who plan to irregularly reach Europe as their final or intermediate destination. By doing so, it intends to problematize some perspectives that have long informed contemporary migration studies, such as the figure of the smuggler and the multifaced concept of solidarity informing these virtual networks. The data partially challenges the categorization of smugglers as 'evil villains' through an exploration of the moral economy of smuggling. Often depicted as pure victims, Iranians illegally moving never cease to have aspirations and remain subjects who make more or less calculated tactical choices about how to reconfigure their lives and advance their projects. The decision to move is interpreted in light of the migration autonomy approach, which focuses on the generative, exceeding, and multiple dimensions of migration movements.

KEYWORDS: Digital ethnography, Iran, Migration, Smuggling, Solidarity.

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1. Introduction

This article examines the intersections between People on the Move (PoM)[2] unauthorized migratory trajectories and digital technologies by analyzing the role of specific digital infrastructures (Preiss, 2022) used by subjects I call 'travel facilitators'[3] to promote their paid services to Iranian citizens willing to embark on 'the Game'[4], i.e. to illicitly enter the European Union[5] via the so-called Western Balkan route. These digital spaces include channels, groups, and pages in Persian, publicly accessible on various platforms frequented by several thousand current and future PoM. The spaces are run by individuals who arrange travels from Türkiye to Europe for a fee; although the activities they promote often fall into a bluish area on the fringes of legality, the administrators aim to present their services as more reliable and collaborative alternatives to the classic network of 'human traffickers' and 'smugglers', and access to these spaces is entirely free and relatively easy.

The paper is structured as follows: the initial section provides an overview of the methodology employed and examines the ethical challenges that arose. The following paragraph sets out a theoretical framework for the diverse interpretations of the figure of the smugglers and the increasing role of digitalisation in unauthorised migration processes and facilitation services, with a focus on Iranian networks and mobilities. Moving from these premises, in the following two sections, the text aims to provide answers to three main research questions.

First, what role do digital infrastructures such as those considered here have in shaping and operating Iranian emic networks of migrants and facilitators along the Balkan route? More specifically, how are they used by this variety of non-state actors involved in unauthorised movements for their own mobility-related purposes, and what kind of networks, imaginaries, counter-narratives and planning do they generate? What drives this question is the awareness of the paucity of research that attempts to apply the new paradigms and understandings of smuggling and the autonomy of migration to illegalised mobility patterns from Iran (Khosravi, 2007). Following this line of inquiry, which ethical and civic principles, language, and rhetoric do travel facilitators employ to gain moral legitimacy for their risky and illegal activities, and how do these discourses reshape understandings of solidarity and people smuggling? Through a content analysis of these spaces, the fourth paragraph discusses how in addition to providing practical advice on how to embark on such journeys, these channels often become interstitial spaces of autonomy, intimacy, and alliance, where pain and hope are shared in more or less anonymous ways, revealing patterns of cooperation, mutual support, and material solidarity among PoM and between PoM and facilitators (Achilli, 2018). Three major issues are discussed: how the operation of these services is collectively portrayed and discussed, the role of the broader community as the primary source of information, and the (re)definition of the figure of the travel facilitator.

[2] I prefer to avoid the word 'migrant' because it has been prescribed a negative connotation in the public discourse over the years, and it is often used to dehumanize people who are already marginalized.

[3] In the paper I use the terms 'facilitators' and 'smugglers' interchangeably, although the latter may be seen by some as an endorsement of a statist perspective. Following Galliend and Weigand (2024), I emphasize here that this is not my intention.

[4] The term 'the Game' is used by many migrants, primarily from the Middle East, to describe their attempts to travel to Western Europe via the Balkan Route (Minca and Collins, 2021). The precise origin of the term is still a matter of debate, although there is a general consensus that it evokes the practice of illicit border crossing as a series of 'levels' that must be overcome in order to reach the final destination, much like in a video game or war simulation, in which one must first defeat opponents and accomplish various intermediate tasks. The mode of travel typically determines the type of 'Game' available, i.e. traversing the forest on foot, utilizing a taxi service overseen by the facilitators, or concealing aboard ships. Alternatively, the most costly 'ticket' game entails the provision of flight tickets and forged documents.

[5] I identify the European Union as a final destination because the paid services offered by the channels I analyze usually terminate there. However, I am well aware that presenting the West as the ultimate goal for many non-Western migrants is part of a Eurocentric perspective that has contributed to the underrepresentation of all places outside Western Europe in migration research despite overwhelming evidence that most international migrants move to neighboring countries.

Third, what do the interactions on these platforms tell us concerning the perspective of the places of origin, the concrete planning and development of mobility projects, and the doubts, desires and fears of their users? How are the abandonment of the homeland, illegal border crossing and migration to the EU collectively imagined, represented and contested within these spaces? The last paragraph seeks to address this issue by giving the floor to the users who animate these spaces and some of their testimonies about their experience of emigrating from Iran. These anonymous pieces of evidence are paired with an interview with Mohsen (fictitious name), an Iranian refugee who has used these paid services to seek asylum in Greece: the testimony, collected through repeated telephone interviews, is valuable as it provides a more in-depth look into the experience of an individual smuggled across two different borders. Though decision-makers, media, and scholars often focus on human smuggling, personal accounts of PoM being smuggled are often neglected as the primary source of information. Although there are some personal accounts of refugee journeys, a profound analysis of the experience of each journey itself barely exists. "The journey, as lived experience, metaphor, concept or construct, has not been the object of systematic study. Therefore, we have limited conceptual apparatus to explore and analyze the significance of such journeys" (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015: 301). Without denying the criticism inherent in the lack of statistical representativeness of this sample, the research attempts to better observe how the main actors of smuggling (facilitators and future and current PoM) view the process of smuggling beyond the way the state tends to portray it. Eventually, the paper aims to alter the prevailing perception of migrants and refugees as passive casualties of global developments and policies by illustrating their innovative skills to navigate the intricate mediascape of information and border regulations in their attempts to reach Europe.

In recent years, nation-states have progressively used technological devices to manage cross-border migration, securitizing border areas and monitoring the movement of people within and across borders. The digital securitization of states involves surveillance devices such as motion sensors, infrared devices, and surveillance cameras that state agents use to manage and monitor cross-border movements. These digital practices are mainly concentrated in border zones at the edges of state territories. Within specialized literature, less research has focused on using digital devices and technologies to prepare and implement unauthorized migration projects. Moreover, fewer studies have analyzed the particular routes examined in this research and endeavoured to investigate the traits of these virtual fields, frequently labelled as tools smugglers employ to lure 'desperate' victims (Latonero and Kift, 2018). The research reveals that digital devices and networks shape PoM's experiences of transit, migratory trajectories, and transnational encounters, playing a significant role in the decision to migrate and the choices made along the way. In the face of increasing border securitization, PoM employ mobile technologies to circumvent borders, generate new forms of migrant-to-migrant protection and assistance, and express their political voices (Godin and Donà, 2021). Social networks play a significant role in shaping the intentions to migrate, the route choice, the method, and the destination country in a circular manner. That being said, PoM's achievement in reaching their destinations increasingly depends on having access not only to a secure physical infrastructure but also to the digital components of a global infrastructure, known as 'digital passages.' These sociotechnical spaces facilitate flows of people, smugglers, governments, corporations, and emerging technologies (Latonero and Kift, 2018). Previous research has demonstrated that the so-called smugglers leverage social networks and increasingly rely on new technologies to operate more effectively (Mavris, 2002); reports have recently surfaced that social media are being used to connect them with people who are planning to move from the Middle East and North Africa. A document from Europol and Interpol on smuggling networks further highlights that social media is also an important tool widely used by migrants and recruiters alike to diffuse information about routes, services, and prices (Europol and Interpol, 2016). However, there are gaps in the literature as to how ICTs and social media are employed for and during irregular migration, which this research sets out to address. Besides, less is known about the role of social

networks and social capital in transit countries, although the significance of social networks in these areas cannot and should not be underestimated (Koser Akcapar, 2010).

Ultimately, it is crucial to emphasize that this is not an attempt to deny the role of smugglers in fatal incidents or to justify their actions. This research considers only the virtual sphere and how roles and representations are built there; it does not intend to question the veracity of these representations nor to suggest that all the individuals involved in these activities are moved by genuinely solidaristic intentions. Instead, the aim is to underscore these networks' multifaceted, ambiguous, and intricate nature and highlight the autonomous decision-making capabilities of individual actors. The experiences of migrants in transit vary in terms of class, gender, age, ethnicity, and political affiliation, as well as the length of their of their stay and their motivation; to enhance our understanding of migratory phases before and after the migration process, we should focus on the formation of these journeys, the social networks that individuals rely on, and the outcomes and risks of specific migration segments. In order to achieve this, we must study the distinct phases of these journeys and the narratives that emerge during them.

2. Methodology and ethics

This paper presents data from an overall year of digital ethnography (Boellstorff *et al*., 2012; Kavanaugh, 2020) conducted in various virtual spaces on different platforms, primarily Telegram, TikTok, and Instagram. Various research techniques and participation strategies have been adopted to match different platforms; Instagram and TikTok are mainly used to promote specific services and share personal journey experiences. Telegram is where market supply and demand meet, information is provided, and the organization takes place. Thus, in the first case, I conducted qualitative image/video analysis and iconographic interpretation (Bayramoğlu, 2022), focusing on how the services are promoted and how both PoM and facilitators represent border-crossing; in the second case, I conducted both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the written interactions. I also participated in several meetings between PoM and facilitators via video, where the latter present their offers and answer all kinds of questions about border crossing and asylum. These meetings are open to anyone, no presentation is required, and the cameras are turned off to protect the identity of the participants. The criteria used to select the channels and groups to examine included free access, the number of registered members (from 1,000 to 50,000) and followers, and active participation by administrators and users in daily conversations and dialogues.

Research on smuggling involves epistemological, social, political, and moral ambivalence and ambiguity for researchers and interlocutors alike. In conducting this research, I have focused my interest on the emic perspective and lived practice of people in an attempt to integrate my analysis into a non-normative empirical approach (Hüsken, 2021). The nature of my research can be described as a 'semi-covert' ethnography, as there is no discernible source of consent, given that there is no requirement to disclose one's identity in accessing these digital spaces. (Calvey, 2008). This kind of research in the context of migration studies presents a number of significant ethical challenges, which have been extensively discussed in academic literature. A primary concern is informed consent, as covert and semi-covert research often circumvents requests for explicit permission, thus potentially violating the autonomy and privacy of participants. This is a particularly sensitive issue when dealing with migratory dynamics, as the subjects may be unaware that their online activities are being monitored and analyzed, which could have implications for their autonomy and privacy. Another critical issue is the potential for harm to participants, who may experience distress or adverse consequences if they discover that they were the subjects of covert observation, particularly given their precarious legal and social

statuses. The use of deception in covert research violates the principle of transparency and can erode trust in researchers and the academic community (Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

In light of these considerations, ethical guidelines have been applied, with a particular focus on striking a balance between the scientific value of the research and the implementation of measures designed to protect confidentiality, minimize harm (Ess, 2002), and respect the 'right to opacity' of participants. Firstly, data collection was confined to publicly accessible digital spaces, thus ensuring that no illicit measures or breaches of restricted access were necessary to gain entry to these online environments. Nevertheless, I have elected to refrain from disclosing my phone number and my surname. Additionally, rigorous measures were taken to safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the subjects, that is, not everything should be seen, explained, understood or documented (Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022). The dissemination of research findings does not reveal any identifiable personal information about users or details about how to locate the aforementioned digital spaces, thereby protecting their identities and reducing the risk of harm or distress from inadvertent exposure.

3. Geographies and imaginaries of the digital spaces: the smuggling services

For many Asian and, more and more, African PoM, the principal routes to Europe by land and sea, commonly known as 'the Game' among various ethnic groups, originate in Türkiye. Among the options available, many of them head westward into Greece before proceeding into the Western Balkans, primarily through Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, although it should be noted that these trajectories are continuously changing according to prevailing political, atmospheric and material conditions; the increase in push-backs and violence by the Bulgarian border police, for example, has led many smuggling networks to avoid this specific border and to choose Greece as their preferred destination, from where there are two main options: to continue by land in the Balkan Peninsula or to take a flight to another European country[6]. Thus, the Western Balkan Route constitutes the most critical informal overland migration corridor in Europe, traversed by thousands of individuals each year and, particularly since the 1990s, by an increasing number of undocumented individuals who have recourse to smuggling services.

Moving from these considerations, this article takes inspiration from İçduygu's call for 'decentering migrant smuggling' (2021) and draws on the empirical value of a growing but still small body of scholarship that calls into question oversimplified accounts of the relationship between facilitators, travellers, and their communities. Since the 2010s, a new field of literature has taken distance from the conventional state-centred, crime-based perspective that emphasizes the dichotomous opposition between the brutality of smuggling networks and the vulnerability of PoM. The paradigms and notions that informed the previous generation have been challenged, unpacked, and replaced by new angles, such as pointing to the active agency of migrants or refugees in the smuggling process or looking at smuggling activities beyond a stereotypical view of criminality (Gallien and Weigand, 2021). Doomernik and Kyle (2004) describe the complex relationship between smugglers and migrants as a spectrum ranging from the altruistic assistance of family and friends to the exploitative dynamics of toughened criminals. Other empirical studies have shown that trust and cooperation are the rule rather than the exception among smugglers and migrants (Raineri, 2021; Spener, 2004, 2009; Bilger, Hofmann and Jandl, 2006; Koser, 2008). Several studies on Türkiye have noted the strong bond of trust between smugglers and PoM (Baird, 2016; Achilli, 2018). These scholars argue against fear-driven and

[6] Information was shared by several PoM in Bulgaria in 2024 and on Telegram channels.

simplistic descriptions of migrant smuggling as a root cause of irregular migration rather than a response to or result of border control policies. Instead, they emphasize the complexity of the phenomenon and its socio-economic, political, and ethnic realities. While smuggling activities can certainly be held responsible for many of the tragedies that occur around the world, effective in creating a 'moral panic' (Cohen, 2011) and demonizing irregular migration, representations and narratives that criminalize smuggling have consistently failed to account for its dynamics and to explain the connections between smugglers and PoM (Achilli, 2018).

Since the 1980s, Iranians have been one of the largest groups of migrants in transit through Turkey: between 1994 and 2004, 21.601 out of 35.162 asylum applications in Türkiye were filed by Iranians (Jefroudi, 2024). According to a significant body of literature (SeeFar, 2016, 2019; Gholampour and Simonovits, 2023), roughly half of Iranians travelling these routes have illegally entered Türkiye with the help of smugglers. Additionally, many of the Iranian smugglers settled in Türkiye, where the covert Iranian network of the 2010s was acknowledged to be one of the five most extensive smuggling operations. Migrant facilitators who cover these routes are generally involved in the migration process in three ways: assistance in leaving Iran (exit strategies), in arranging the journey and providing guidance along the way, and lastly, in helping enter the country of asylum (entry strategies). The online services analysed by this research are exclusively related to the second and third stages, while the departure from Iran is left to the individuals to organize themselves, with mere indications from the facilitators about the main places where to take a bus or a taxi to leave the country.

Migration to Europe is associated with highly complex information needs about the journey, the destination, and the bureaucratic process of obtaining legal documents; each new need presents problems of where to seek information, factors of trust, financial and other costs, where the consequences of receiving bad or false information can be most severe (Borkert, Fisher and Yafi, 2018). When PoM struggle to cross borders autonomously, they seek the assistance of more experienced compatriots or experts with established practices on the ground. Through these emic networks, they gain informal knowledge and experiences during prolonged crossing attempts, forming cultural and social capital that enables some PoM to facilitate others' crossing of borders. According to Seefar (2019), this is primarily attributable to the widespread lack of knowledge about the asylum process and how to acquire legal paperwork. Attempts by states to discourage irregular migration by restricting their policies contribute to the increased use of facilitation services: when border controls are tightened but the causes of migration persist, PoM resort to other tactics and support, which have been fundamentally shaped over time by increasing digitalization (Preiss, 2022).

In fact, before entering a new country, the migratory journey often begins by 'going through the screen' (Borkert *et al*., 2018), seeking a variety of information, such as the best country to seek asylum, the local economy, the border police, etc. Wall, Campbell, and Janbek (2017), among others, confirm that new technologies play a critical role in planning and managing the hazards of a migratory journey, and in protecting and empowering migrants upon arrival. Gillespie *et al*. (2016) also argue that for refugees seeking to reach Europe, digital infrastructures – understood as the ensemble of digital technologies, including the underlying support structures that facilitate migration processes (Preiss, 2022) - have become as important as physical ones. Both before and increasingly during migration, PoM rely on social media like Facebook and Twitter, as well as applications like WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, and Google Maps, to obtain information on routes and intended countries of destination, to establish communication with smugglers, facilitators, and brokers, and to request help (Frouws *et al.*, 2016), in alignment with Diminescu's conceptualization of the 'Connected Migrant,' defined as a migrant on the move who relies on alliances outside his own group of belonging without cutting his ties with the social network at home, using digital technologies to do so (2008). Despite an increase of interest in the use of digital platforms to control unauthorized border crossings, to maintain transnational relationships, or by smugglers to attract clients and organize border crossings, there is still a dearth of research on how various non-state actors involved in unauthorized movements engage with digital passages for their

own mobility-related purposes (Bayramoğlu, 2022). This includes an understanding of their capacity to build networks, collective imaginaries, counter-narratives and mobility planning. Social media platforms, most notably Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram, have become pervasive communication channels among travel facilitators for the purpose of engaging with prospective clients and orchestrating logistical operations. These platforms are used to advertise their services, provide real-time updates on border controls, and arrange meeting points (Tinti and Reitano, 2017). Their low cost and extensive reach facilitate the operation across national boundaries, offering services to a significant pool of clients who can interact and compare the offers like in a physical marketplace. Further, the use of encrypted messaging and closed groups enables smugglers to organize and adapt routes in response to real-time information on border patrols and checkpoints (Brekke and Brochmann, 2015).

The channels and groups examined in this study found a vast and intricate system of paid services to cross borders from Türkiye into the European Union illicitly, are horizontally organized, with multiple affiliations and a limited geographic reach, in line with what has been observed in several other contexts (Raineri, 2021). Due to their specific characteristics, I identify them as information hubs and information battlegrounds (Ambrosini, 2021). While many of the Telegram groups have also Instagram profiles, their functionality and objectives differ: Instagram and TikTok are primarily utilized to promote logistical services based on emic networks, such as pages for inexpensive hostels catering to Iranian travellers. Additionally, they are employed to construct an appealing image of migration, as evidenced by videos of jubilant travellers who have reached their destinations and images of scenic landscapes. Furthermore, interactions on them are constrained, functioning more as a promotional display than an actual forum for debate, and as a potent instrument for shaping a counter-visuality regarding unauthorized migration (Bayramoğlu, 2022).

The paid services available on Telegram vary according to the type of 'Game' chosen by the individual and include the provision of constant virtual assistance by the facilitators, various documents and tickets, route planning and booking of accommodation and transportation. At the time of this research, the most popular services provided were the 'taxi game' departing from Istanbul, where PoM travel by car, and the cheaper 'jungle game,' in which they cross borders on foot, following GPS points sent by administrators step by step. A more expensive 'ticket game' was also offered, where the high prices of services (revolving around 2,500€ and more) included air tickets, documents and the choice of a safe destination in Europe. More recently, a new dynamic called the 'lawyer game' has been introduced, whereby when PoM cross the border into Greece, facilitators alert a trusted local lawyer to accompany them to a refugee camp with border police. As an information hub, they are also places to obtain other information for the next steps of the journey, whether it be about employment, applying for asylum, documents, work, or family reunification. But in reality, much more can be found.

4. Re-framing solidarity and morality

While seemingly falling into the category of what is commonly known as 'smuggling', the representatives of these activities deliberately refrain from using this negatively connoted term in Persian ('*ghachaghchi*') and instead opt for an opposite vocabulary and semantic field. Those who undertake the journey are called '*khod-andaz*,' meaning literally 'those who throw themselves,' emphasizing autonomy and independence. For a fee, *khod-andaz* can be led and accompanied by '*rah balad'* or '*rah rawan'*, guides familiar with the way. These essentially poetic conceptions of the guide hark back to the times of caravans and emphasize the migrant as a

'traveller' rather than someone forced to flee their country[7]. In one video session, for example, a woman commented: "Thank you for what you do, may God bless you. I had horrible experiences with others, the *ghachaghchi*; they took all our money and treated us horribly"[8]. By contrasting her negative experiences with other networks, this woman positively emphasizes the difference between the facilitators of the group and the criminal organizations. A careful choice of vocabulary emphasizes the distance: the people who exploited and abused her are defined as real 'smugglers', while the facilitators are addressed with respect and blessings. These guides are often individuals who start from their homes like other PoM, and then, due to some motivations, they join a smuggling network, sometimes for limited periods (Vještica and Dragojević, 2021). As a matter of fact, the boundaries between smugglers and migrants are shifting and evanescent, given that migrants are, in most cases, facilitators (Triandafyllidou, 2018). Practices of border-crossing facilitation become a source of income for people who temporarily stop in strategic border locations along their migratory route. Indeed, PoM and smugglers often share similar struggles, routes, services, and networks of people being transported. Acknowledging the above is especially significant because it contributes to problematizing and ultimately deconstructing mainstream polarized narratives about predatory smugglers and victimized migrants. Conversely, the facilitators' specific expertise is recognized by migrants who, de facto, do not have other solutions available. In fact, human smuggling entails a significant amount of bargaining and exchange. Not all PoM perceive such activities as illegal or exploitative but rather as a service made inaccessible by global policies. For example, Mohsen, the Iranian man interviewed as a key informant, commented significantly: "If there were no borders, you know... I would not have resorted to this. Moreover, I have no money to travel to Europe legally, I will continue my journey with the help of smugglers. People with such experience are needed"[9]. In another Telegram group, a woman presented her case to other users, complaining: "...I would prefer to travel legally, I have two daughters, and I am afraid for them. But of course, if it is not possible, I know what the options are...I would be grateful if someone could guide me through this"[10]. These accounts recall Achilli's testimonies among Syrian refugees, according to which "smugglers are neither good nor bad. You pay for a service, and you get what you pay for" (Achilli, 2018:83). Like Achilli's informants, this Iranian man turned to smugglers when his family refused to help him, and he had no legal options left. Through some friends, he contacted Telegram channels that provide services to leave Iran and reach the European Union. In describing his experience, he emphasized the respect he received and the absence of mistreatment during his journey, which lasted over two months until he reached Greece.

The Telegram group and channels form a distinct virtual space where individuals access, rely on, and turn to various information and knowledge to begin and continue their journeys. To cross the borders, comprehension of countermeasures and tactics to evade controls is crucial. Users can exchange content, pose inquiries, and reply to others. Additionally, regular anonymous video sessions are held by all groups so that users can communicate live with administrators and each other. Details about the routes, including the challenges of each step and the required documentation and equipment, are provided at no cost, forming an extensive solidarity network in which each user can share their knowledge and help strangers plan their journeys. Obtaining precise GPS coordinates to begin the Game necessitates a private negotiation with the facilitators, which typically occurs on Telegram following an initial contact through the open chat, while all other information in the channels is freely available to anyone who accesses them.

[7] Cultural codes applicable to travellers in the country of origin consider freedom of movement to be a fundamental human right, regardless of the existence of legal borders; a traveller is a person who deserves shelter, protection from danger, food, and other assistance; they are not considered as 'intruders' but instead guests (Vještica and Dragojević, 2021).
[8] Telegram video session, 22/12/2023.
[9] Interview, 25/03/2023.
[10] From a Telegram group, 12/12/2024.

Most of the practices analyzed by this research relate to informal cooperative actions that can be framed in terms of moral economy, understood here as "the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space" (Fassin, 2009:49). While framing the extraction of money in exchange for help as a moral act may seem counterintuitive at first, for many of the users in these spaces, such a request does not necessarily indicate some form of immorality, as the administrators are "actively using their time to help us reach our goals," as one man wrote in one of the most crowded Telegram channels[11]. Traditionally rooted in kinship and village ties, solidarity now involves transnational networks of complete strangers shaped by economic necessity and shared vulnerability, adapting to modern challenges. The entangled relationship between smugglers and PoM calls for a critique of abstract models of solidarity and liberal moral ideals (Meagher, 2005) and demands an examination of how the moral economies of smuggling emerge. For example, one of the Instagram pages states that its goal is "to provide information to achieve a safe life." Another declares that its aim is "to provide correct and safe information about migration, as every person should have the right to receive". Rather than a mere 'business approach', the exchange of information within these spaces, which is shared free of charge, can be understood as a solidarity practice that contributes to the cultivation and expansion of a 'migration industry from below' (Bonnin, Fravega and Palmas, 2024), implying our gaze to shift to the operose dimension enacted by illegalized travellers (Khosravi, 2007), rather than interpreting all of these human flows and practices in terms of the rationality, predictability, and linearity of a 'business enterprise' supplying goods and services. It also means focusing on the practices, representations and forms of self-organization of those who travel or contribute to the material production of travel, rather than looking for the apex and subordinate figures of an integrated organization - in a popular and moralized narrative, the traffickers and smugglers.

Most facilitators identify as service providers offering something people cannot obtain legally. They know they are part of a volatile and dangerous market, so they charge high fees to their clients and claim that they are engaged in a moral economy by helping people avoid misery and danger (Golovko, 2018; Mannocchi, 2019). This perception is widely held by those who request their services. "The admins make a significant contribution by assisting us," one man commented in response to another user's complaint about high prices. "They invest their time to ensure our safe arrival at our destination."[12] Solidarity is conceptualized here as an intricate interaction realm that discloses and produces porosity and shifts in hierarchies and boundaries (Barth, 1998) between and within various social groups in transitional space. The specific migration industry built by these digital networks is permeated by a multiplicity of acts of 'spurious solidarity': a diverse and complex array of practices and collaborations take place in various contexts involving various actors and driven by either humanitarian, political, religious, ethical, or economic motivations (Amigoni and Queirolo Palmas, 2023).

Some of the users of these spaces gather preliminary information on how to begin the migration process, while some are already halfway through their journey, leading to a dialogue that shapes the migration experience. In multiple video sessions, users, among which several women, share poems and prayers conveying hope and courage for themselves and individuals aspiring to depart the country. They discuss their uncertainties and reservations concerning the movement of children or family, probing for advice on the obstacles they may confront in different destinations and crafting a persuasive argumentation to claim asylum.

The facilitators, on their part, perform branding and marketing tasks to present migration as a collective experience, challenging but optimistic, as they rely on a solid track record in order to stand out from an increasingly crowded field (SeeFar, 2016). This is also the fruit of an increasingly widespread process of

[11] From a Telegram group, 01/01/2024.
[12] From a Telegram group, 06/10/2023.

commodification of migration and professionalisation of smuggling. Reliability and trustworthiness are essential in a highly competitive field, including protecting the digital environment. In some groups, fake nicknames and disguised personal photos can lead to bans from video sessions, as members' safety cannot be guaranteed. Access to desirable resources is not the only factor that makes social networks convertible into social capital, as obligations of trust and expectations that adhere in relationships also play a crucial role. In one channel, PoM are depicted as 'our children' whom are 'always taken to their destination'. The language used is informal and friendly: male users are referred to as 'brothers' (*baradar* or *dadash*), and jokes are often made during the conversations. The services are described as a group or familial experience and PoM are addressed as comrades to be accompanied with care throughout the journey. This family-based understanding of the smuggling network is common and documented among smuggling groups of different origins (Achilli, 2018). Although the concept of 'family' may sometimes evoke associations with the mafia, in this case, it refers more to the relationship of equality and trust that binds members of a family together rather than the rigid hierarchical structure observed within criminal organizations (Raineri, 2021).

The research findings confirm that migrants and their broader community are almost always the primary sources of information (Coleman, 1988). Furthermore, knowledge permeates PoM quickly through word of mouth and social media platforms such as Instagram, chats, and other social networks, subsequently triggering certain behaviours. This primarily occurs because it is easier to trust individuals who are already familiar and because studying official and institutional sources is not deemed sufficient anymore (SeeFar, 2019). Mohsen, for example, recalled how the Telegram channels where to contact a smuggler were suggested to him by some friends who came from the same circumstances that led him to leave Iran: being homosexual. Frequently, people either need to gain knowledge of where to access certain information or are unable to understand it due to language barriers. In this sense, the establishment of smuggling networks on an ethnic basis serves to reinforce what Ilse Van Liempt calls the 'chain of trust': ethnic solidarities between smugglers and migrants that tend to fade the further migrants are from their country of origin (2007:171).

5. Envisions and expectations: leaving Iran, reaching Europe

The 'culture of migration' comes with its corresponding values, beliefs, and worldviews, which together transform the social landscape in the sending countries, as well as the ways in which migration is imagined, expected and experienced individually and collectively (Khosravi, 2017; Asayesh and Kazemipur, 2024).The stories and anecdotes shared by friends and fellow compatriots construct ideas that span continents, impervious to borders or law enforcement. Moreover, social networks that foster ties and exchanges facilitate the spread of helpful information about travel routes and contribute to the cross-border dissemination of aspirations, images and expectations, which inevitably impact individual decisions. Since the culture of migration invokes the act of migration itself as a marker of social distinction among one's compatriots, the achievements of others serve as positive examples to follow and for which to express appreciation and optimism, shaping the perception of the migration experience. On Telegram, PoM and administrators often share photos and videos of the journey, emphasizing the positive aspects and carefully disguising the more problematic ones: the faces portrayed are fatigued but happy and victorious, and people huddle together, highlighting the familial and community dimension of the journey. For instance, one individual shared a video stating, "Yesterday, Amal's group crossed the Greek border and arrived in the forest without any *rah balad*, which is a significant achievement for Amal's group and our entire team. May God provide them with strength." In response to the video, a woman stated, "Watching these videos warms my heart, I swear to God." [13] Other users commented,

[13] From a Telegram group, 22/10/2023.

and some requested more detailed information regarding the travel's material circumstances. This case is notable since the facilitators played a more marginal role in the group's progress, yet it is frequently praised as a model for other users. Another Telegram channels, for example, claims to be exclusively designed for 'purposeful travellers' and its administrators have provided comprehensive guidelines covering all facets of unauthorized migration, including all the psychological implications of leaving Iran and moving abroad:

> "Emigrating has become a common phenomenon for us [Iranians]. Leaving your motherland is the most important decision of your life. You must weigh it carefully, considering all the advantages and disadvantages. You must ponder all the costs of living, working, and studying conditions in the countries you are living in. The reasons and modes of emigration have undergone significant changes recently - unsuitable political, economic, social, and educational conditions. Emigration's life and psychological implications are much more complex than you think. You may not reach your destination if you leave without the right psychological preparation. Here is also a list of drugs you can take to ease the stress and anxiety during the journey."[14]

This evidence reinforces the theory of a steadily growing culture of migration within Iran as the product of a sustained and substantial increase in the number of objective and imagined emigrants, making migration a stage of the everyday life cycle and a rite of passage (Asayesh and Kazemipur, 2024). The act of crossing borders illegally has evolved into a collective endeavour; the possession of adequate physical training and equipment alone is no longer sufficient; psychological motivations and the appropriate mindset are also cited as prerequisites for the successful completion of the process. Another administrator welcomed the arrival of a group in Germany by stating, "The goal is granted to those who start today what others will start tomorrow. Success is not an accident. We have already proven to be the best."[15] An essential facet of marketing these spaces involves presenting border crossing as an experience to strive for with optimism, commitment, and dedication. Success leads to great fortune and a role model status for future adventurers. This well-conceived messaging, imbued with a touch of neoliberal ethos, aims to counter the widely held perception of smugglers as con and dangerous individuals among Iranian asylum seekers and refugees (Vještica and Dragojević, 2021; Gholampour and Simonovits, 2023) and to promote an alternative migration narrative that can foster shared legitimacy and imagination.

The process of smuggling described in this text involves forming an 'ethical scene' (Cohen, 2011), a moral community between migrants and smugglers. While Cohen and Achilli's cases involved constituting themselves against an immoral 'Europe', most Iranians involved in these channels view the Islamic Republic of Iran as their main 'enemy' and Europe as a safe destination with better life options. As discussed shortly below, this sometimes leads to distortions and partially incorrect or exaggerated expectations about what European countries can offer. According to several comments by facilitators, Iranians are well-regarded and favoured in Europe, especially in highly targeted countries France, Germany, and the Netherlands. These statements emphasize that European citizens belonging to older generations who grew up during the Pahlavi's monarchy recognize that Iranians are distinct from 'other migrants.' To maintain this reputation, they advise users to 'play smart' and avoid harming the perception of Iranians abroad, reinforcing thus the misleading binary opposition between genuine 'refugees' on the one hand and 'bogus', 'fake' or 'undeserving' refugees on the other (De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli, 2018). Because Iranians are not as quickly eligible for refugee status as other nationalities, they are forced to configure their identity in the face of Iran's unfavourable media image as a hub for terrorism and radicalism (Cohen and k, 2021). They have decided to embrace their

[14] From a Telegram video session, 22/11/2023.
[15] From a Telegram group, 25/02/2024.

favourable image of successful integration in host countries as highly educated entrepreneurs and upholders of secular culture (Malek, 2011; Khosravi, 2017). Not casually, economic and political conditions within the Islamic Republic of Iran are frequently cited as primary drivers of emigration, with ethnic minorities, women, and the working class feeling notably excluded from economic and educational opportunities.

The present study is of particular relevance also due to its departure from the majority of literature focusing on elitist, politicised migration from Iran. The second half of the 1990s showed a slight change in the social profile of Iranian refugees. Existing literature traditionally characterizes migration from Iran as an elitist phenomenon. It is widely agreed that the migration flow in the 1980s was more politically oriented and hailed from the economic, political, and cultural elite (Jefroudi, 2024). Nevertheless, recent data necessitates some nuance in this notion of the Iranian exodus exclusively of the elite. Iranians in transit come from various backgrounds in terms of their age, gender, ethnicity, and political experience among others, and after the mid-1990s, migration from Iran is reportedly more economic and less political (Koser Akcapar, 2010). Currently, the primary factors driving migration from Iran are rooted in the country's distinctive socio-political landscape and the recent economic downturn. The literature indicates that Iranian asylum seekers include a diverse group of individuals, including political dissidents, social activists, artists, ethnic and religious minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. In recent years, this population has significantly diversified with a rapid increase in students, workers, and non-political citizens, challenging the misconception that the majority of the Iranian diaspora consists solely of politically dissident individuals fleeing Islam.

The prevalent issues tackled by the different digital groups are connected to the labour market, particularly Iran's lack of job security. This is consistent with other findings: according to Rivetti (2016) and Maljoo, (2017), about 90% of Iranian workers experience job insecurity, including those with temporary employment contracts and those who earn low wages and struggle to afford necessities, while Asayesh and Kazamipur (2024) highlight the mismatch between the number of graduates in the education system and the demands of the local labour market. Not surprisingly, numerous online inquiries revolve around acquiring a visa in various European nations and the prospect of employment. Individuals compare and exchange information about acquaintances, coworkers, and family members residing overseas, creating a network of expectations and aspirations, with young men significantly more likely to cite the pursuit of employment as the top reason for emigrating. This is remarkable also because only a limited number of studies have considered the role of digitalisation during migration processes related to labour migration (Preiss, 2022).

The second most frequent reason for complaints is the perceived lack of freedom. An administrator gave the ensuing advice, following rational choice and optimal decision-making theory: "First, gather information, then set aside your funds, and finally embark on your journey to freedom."[16] Women, in particular, often ponder the concept of freedom. Upon learning of one user's successful journey to Italy, a woman exclaims, "Yay for your newfound freedom! I aspire to entrust my freedom to you as well"[17]. However, it is crucial to understand freedom in a comprehensive sense, encompassing a plethora of expectations and demands, such as freedom from job insecurity, family issues (more frequently conveyed by women), religious persecution, and existential precariousness (Gholampour and Simonovits, 2023). During a video session on Telegram[18], two individuals made the following observations:

> "People in Iran wake up every morning with a thousand thoughts: the job, the car, the future, what will happen today; these worries consume you. In Europe, there are difficulties with language and integration, but you do not wake up every morning fearing tomorrow. People come here and wonder why they did not leave earlier. We, in

[16] From an Instagram profile, 25/06/2023.
[17] From a Telegram group, 10/09/2023.
[18] 12/11/2023.

> Iran, with any economic condition, are worried about the future; we grow old like this. I do not want to publicize Europe; I want to make a comparison."
>
> "People in Europe enjoy themselves, they spend money, and they do not have these anxieties. Governments worry about their citizens. Sure, they take taxes, but they do not go into the pockets of the *akhund* [Islamic clergy]. I do not understand why European countries that have nothing, neither oil nor anything else, are so rich while Iran, which has everything, is poor. Then, if you complain, they say you are anti-revolutionary."

The pursuit of a higher quality of life is generally the most prominent reason for emigration from Iran (Renani, Shirazi and Sadeghi Amroabadi, 2014), which in many cases is accompanied by fanciful images of destination countries and unrealistic expectations about the postmigration experience (Arabestani, 2024; Asayesh, Kazemipur and Sadighi, 2020). It is clear that these expectations and desires contain some elements of mystification that collectively shape the imaginaries of migration within these digital spaces. Although administrators often warn against the (primarily physical) challenges of unauthorized border crossing, life in Europe still appears surrounded by a mystical aura of possibility and privilege that appears to constitute one of the primary drivers of emigration Such imagery is also present in Mohsen's words, as he states: "I wish Muslim countries would also lift their borders. I am aware that there are differences in Europe, where laws are in place to protect and potentially conceal negative aspects"[19]. Further, it is worth emphasizing that this rhetoric contributes to the reinforcement of positive images of travel facilitators as "good guys helping Iranians escape the regime" within the framework of what İçduygu (2021) describes as migrant smuggling contributing to some extent to a process of re-framing of reality: the creation of 'imagined worlds' partly shaped by the media, and partly by the social networks (Koser Akcapar, 2010).

6. Conclusions

The case of the digital smuggling networks used by Iranians provides a productive field for discussing many issues and concepts that are central to the lives of unauthorized migrants and the study of migration. A non-exhaustive list of these includes the taxonomy applied to migrants, refugees, and figures who facilitate illegal border crossing and its consequences; the conditions under which these categories evolve or remain intact; how people make and remake their identities through their experiences of transit (Jefroudi, 2024).

This contribution focused on the production, circulation, and use of underground knowledge among unauthorized Iranian people on the move within specific digital spaces. Through leveraging this underground knowledge, unauthorized individuals can achieve mobility and survival despite government efforts to impede and repatriate them. Specialized knowledge, resources, intermediaries, and expertise at border crossings are shared among virtual networks involved in smuggling and solidarity. These networks shape the routes, circumstances, and, ultimately, the outcomes of those crossing borders. A transnational network of mutual support and care is often formed by amalgamating diverse experiences and cumulative information gathered from various times and locations, shaping a process that is often unstructured yet vital for the network's success. This is also referred to as mobile commons (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013), which entails the capacity to cultivate, generate, and revive the contents, practices, and impacts that facilitate the movements, brought together and manifested through the invisible knowledge of mobility, the infrastructure of connectivity, the plurality of informal economies, the communities of justice, and the politics of care.

[19] Interview, 27/03/2023.

While navigating the perilous course between the objectivism of economic models in migration studies, which treats migrants as effectively inert objects on the one hand, and the humanitarian reasoning that has long dominated refugee studies, which treats refugees or asylum seekers as mere victims, on the other, the autonomy of the migration perspective has consistently insisted on analyzing migratory movements as exercising a significant degree of autonomy (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2015; De Genova *et al*., 2018). The Iranian PoM observed in this study appear as digital agents of change, posting and sharing information on social media and digital social networks. As both consumers and producers of digital migration knowledge, they also demonstrate a sophisticated level of awareness regarding information quality and disinformation (Borkert *et al*., 2018; Dekker et al., 2018).

The accounts collected show how unhelpful - and often counterproductive - it can be to understand this phenomenon when smugglers are portrayed as cruel and ruthless criminals driven solely by profit. Despite the exploitative role of human smugglers, existing smuggling organizations between Iran and Europe have become part of migrants' emic networks and are well anchored in the local social structures, not only economically but also socially and culturally, as exemplified by the 'lawyer game' (Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022). The persistence of smuggling services despite efforts by nation-states to dismantle them is a reminder of the determination of migrants to flee their countries (Mezzadra, 2020) and highlights the strong bond that forms between smugglers and their customers. This connection feeds into a common framework of morality and piety built and maintained by both parties (Achilli, 2018; Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022). Human smuggling can vary from altruistic acts to exploitative attempts, involving occasional one-person smugglers or more complex networks where trust and cooperation frequently play a crucial role in the migrant-smuggler relationship.

Moreover, the production and dissemination of such knowledge and information are increasingly facilitated by new digital communication platforms and widespread access to the internet and devices. Individuals, in turn, access various data that they compare and process according to their shared experiences, needs, and dreams. It is vital to frame migration not solely as an individual decision or the sum of individual choices but as a social practice grounded in a specific social context and network. While the exploitation of naivety and distress makes fraud far from rare, increased access to social media technology helps reduce information asymmetry (Raineri, 2021). Iranians who move illegally are frequently depicted as pure and powerless victims, but they have aspirations and make calculated tactical choices to reconfigure their lives and advance their projects. Instead of being passive victims, they are active agents in their migratory journey, which manifests itself as a (pro)active process of decision-making in which complex information needs and information gains through social media play a vital role (Borkert *et al*., 2018**)**. The daily exchanges between migrants and their crossing agents, indeed, constitute social negotiations through which these actors cultivate and enrich their agency.

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