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### **Easy information, easy migration? Irregular journeys and information gaps**

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## **Easy information, easy migration? Irregular journeys and information gaps**

**Matilde Rosina \***

### **Abstract**

This article analyses the role of information in shaping potential migrants' decisions on whether to migrate (irregularly) to Europe, in reference to current globalisation and populist dynamics. At first sight, both the diffusion of information and communication technologies, globally, and the strong emphasis on deterring unauthorised migration, in Europe, would suggest that potential migrants should detain relatively accurate knowledge of the sanctions associated to irregular entry and stay. Yet, available evidence seems to imply otherwise. Building upon primary and secondary sources, this article investigates the degree of information held by migrants aiming to reach European countries, and whether or not it plays a significant role in influencing their decisions.

### **Keywords**

Migration, information, deterrence, globalisation, populism

### **Abstract**

Questo articolo analizza il ruolo dell'informazione nelle scelte dei potenziali migranti quanto alla possibilità di migrare (irregolarmente) in Europa, in riferimento all'odierna globalizzazione e alle dinamiche populiste. A prima vista, sia la diffusione delle tecnologie d'informazione e di comunicazione, in tutto il mondo, sia il forte accento posto sul contrasto dell'immigrazione non autorizzata in Europa, suggerirebbero che i potenziali migranti dovrebbero possedere una conoscenza piuttosto precisa delle sanzioni conseguenti all'entrata e al soggiorno irregolare. Tuttavia, l'evidenza disponibile sembra mostrare un quadro differente. Basandosi sulle fonti primarie e secondarie, questo articolo indaga il livello di informazione effettivamente posseduto dai migranti che puntano a raggiungere i paesi europei, e se ciò giochi un ruolo importante o meno nell'influenzare le loro decisioni.

### **Parole chiave**

Migrazione, informazione, deterrenza, globalizzazione, populismo

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## **Introduction**

This article analyses the role of information in shaping potential migrants' decisions on whether to migrate (irregularly) to Europe, in reference to current globalisation and populist dynamics. At first sight, both the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs), globally, and the strong emphasis on deterring unauthorised migration, in Europe, would suggest that potential migrants should detain relatively accurate knowledge of the sanctions associated to irregular entry and stay. Yet, available evidence seems to imply otherwise. Building upon primary and secondary sources, this article investigates the degree of information held by migrants aiming to reach European countries, and whether or not it plays a significant role in influencing their decisions.

Surveying the available literature, and enriching it with new evidence from the cases of Italy and France, the paper argues that information is not always as widespread among migrants as it may be expected to be. Specifically, the very unevenness of the globalisation of information, and frequent prioritisation of domestic audiences by politicians in Europe, emerge as important factors contributing to such results. Additionally, the paper suggests that even when migrants are aware of the sanctions related to unauthorised border-crossing, they may not be deterred by them.

The discussion is structured as follows. First, the research questions are defined, together with the scope of the article, and the methodology used. Second, the expectation that migrants detain accurate information is explored, with specific reference to the possible impact of the spread of information and communication technologies, and of the current emphasis on deterrence measures. Following this initial discussion, the actual degree of information held by migrants is investigated, relying on both questionnaires conducted in Italy and France and previous studies, and an interpretation of the results is proposed. Finally, the paper moves to the last section, in which it investigates the ability of information to substantially affect migrants' decisions.

## **1. Definitions and methods**

The paper starts from acknowledging a double paradox: Despite the rise in information and communication technologies on the global level, and the intense rhetoric surrounding restrictive border measures in Europe, evidence suggests that migrants who enter or stay irregularly in Europe do not always detain accurate information concerning the required documents and possible sanctions. The questions at the core of this article are thus the following: Do increased globalisation and populist emphasis on restrictive measures lead to migrants having more information concerning their travels to Europe and the sanctions they may face there? If not, why? Finally, does information significantly affect migrants' decisions to leave?

Specifically, the research focuses on irregular migratory flows from African and Middle Eastern countries to Europe. While the definition of 'irregular migration' is sometimes contested (see Ambrosini 2018, 5), the author follows Boswell and Geddes (2011, 129) in viewing it as resulting from different combinations of irregular entry, stay, and/or employment. In this article specifically, emphasis is placed on third country nationals who either enter a European country, or stay there, irregularly (rather than on those who work without the necessary authorisations). In this context, although asylum seekers are to be excluded from the category of irregular migrants if their asylum claims are accepted<sup>1</sup>, it is important to keep in mind that the difference between them and 'economic migrants' is often far from straightforward. Indeed, not only are the motives for leaving often intertwined, but migrants escaping poverty also apply for asylum, and refugees often pursue irregular routes to reach Europe (Triandafyllidou 2016, 34).

In this context, several types of information may be considered, when looking at migrants' knowledge. This could include for example their awareness of legal entitlements and economic conditions in receiving countries, or of entry requirements and sanctions for failing to meet them. This paper focuses specifically on migrants' knowledge of the last two types of information (i.e. entry requirements and sanctions for irregular entry and/or stay), as it is these that would be expected to deter irregular migration.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Refugee Convention (1951, art. 31), states "shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees who [...] enter or are present in their territory without authorization [...]."

To analyse the above, the article relies on both secondary and primary sources, including the results of a questionnaire conducted by the author among migrants in Italy and France in 2017-8. The survey was carried out with 104 third country nationals who had already entered one of the two countries, and who were over 16<sup>2</sup>. Being limited in number, questionnaires are not representative of the whole migrant population in the two countries. At the same time, however, they add to the discussion by providing key insight deriving from foreigners themselves, and offer interesting hints of respondents' perceptions of entry requirements and sanctions. To deepen the understanding of respondents' knowledge (as defined above), the survey included questions on: (1) the documents needed to enter the relevant country (either Italy or France) and the sanctions foreseen for irregular entry/stay, (2) the sources of such information, and (3) the effect of sanctions on respondents' decisions on how to migrate. Concerning sanctions (point 1), the survey listed a number of options, relating to detention, returns, as well as the possibility of incurring criminal penalties, and specifically a fine in Italy (TUI art. 10-bis) and both a fine and imprisonment in France (Ceseda art. L621-1).

Having defined the core focus of the analysis, and the methodology used, I now turn to discussing the expectation that migrants have accurate information concerning entry requirements and sanctions.

## **2. Diffusion of information and emphasis on deterrence**

Migration and populism have become the buzzwords of the new millennium. From the so-called 'migration (or refugee) crisis' of 2014-6, to the role of immigration for the Brexit vote, from the construction of fences along several of the Union's borders, to the establishment of populist governments across Europe: Migration and populism are not only crucial aspects of today's world politics, but also strictly interrelated.

In this context, both phenomena are intrinsically linked to globalisation processes too. While the specific ways through which the latter affect migratory flows are debated, there seems to be general agreement that globalisation does

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaires were anonymous, and based on non-probability sampling methods, including purposive and snowball sampling. Out of the 104 questionnaires, 99 were conducted in Italy, 5 in France.

substantially shape migration (see Talani 2010, 2; Czaika and de Haas 2014). Similarly, while the causes of populism are contentious, they have often been related to developments in the global political economy (see Colantone and Stanig 2016; Autor et al. 2016; Frieden 2018). As an example, Frieden (2018) characterises the phenomenon as the result of a backlash against globalisation, which derives from governments' double-failure to adequately compensate those harmed by the process, and to pay significant attention to their concerns (what he calls the *failure of compensation* and *of representation*).

At first sight, both globalisation and populism would suggest an increasing likelihood that potential migrants possess accurate information on the sanctions related to irregular migration. This would happen specifically through the growing spread of communication and information technologies worldwide, and the increase in the emphasis on deterrence measures in Europe.

To begin with, starting in the 1990s, communication and computer technologies have seen an exponential growth (Dicken 2011, 80). The extent of the innovation is such that technological change is often considered to be one of the key factors enabling and furthering globalisation processes (Roccu and Talani 2019, 2; Dicken 2011, 76; McGrew 2017, 274-6), to the extent of leading to the "shrinking" of the world (Dicken 2011, 82). As an example, emails are now among the preferred communication means for businesses, and mobile internet services (such as Wi-fi, 4G or - today - 5G) have drastically decreased users' dependence on fixed communication infrastructures (Dicken 2011, 91 and 93). Likewise, mobile phone subscriptions reached 7.8bn in 2018 (World Bank 2020), and internet users overcame 4bn in 2019 (ITU 2019, 1).

Thanks to the diffusion of such technologies, migrants too may be expected to detain more information. Indeed, there seems to be evidence that that mobile phones in particular have now greatly been incorporated into migrants and refugees' experiences (Newell et al. 2016; Dekker et al. 2018; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017). Dekker and others (2018, 5), for instance, report that, out of 54 Syrian refugees they interviewed in the Netherlands in 2016, 80% used their phones to access the internet during their migration journeys, a proportion that parallels Latonero and others' (2018) finding that 80% of refugees surveyed in Greece considered mobile phone access as important. Social media appear to be especially key for many to keep in touch with previous and fellow migrants (Dekker et al. 2018; Fiedler 2019; Latonero et al. 2018). Likewise, studies on migration in both the European and North American context find evidence of

migrants being conscious of (and concerned about) the possibilities of being tracked by the police through their phones (Newell et al. 2016; Dekker et al. 2018), thus suggesting increased awareness.

Indeed, recent innovations in ICTs have often been seen as key facilitators of mobility. Undoubtedly, with the advance and diffusion of ICTs, migration experiences have changed drastically from what they looked like after World War II. From remaining in touch with relatives and friends afar through mobile phones, to using the GPS to find the way; from sharing advice on social media, to using apps to send money home, migrants' experiences have been greatly altered (Dekker et al. 2018; McAuliffe and Khadria 2019, esp. 8, 304; Mancini et al. 2019; Hamel 2009; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017). The extent of the advances in information, communication (and transport) technologies embedded in current globalisation dynamics is such that it has been depicted a crucial 'enabler' of migration (McAuliffe 2016, 4). In the words of Hamel (2009, 35), 'ICTs are in a sense becoming technological social safety nets and resources that can be tapped in times of need'.

In parallel to the above, in recent years, several European governments have placed strong emphasis on deterring irregular migration. Indeed, by presenting mobility as the result of a calculated, rational evaluation of costs and benefits, deterrence has a great appeal for policymakers, who emphasise how the introduction of harsher measures would reduce the 'unwanted' behaviour (Rosina 2019a). The criminalisation of irregular migration (that is, the use of the criminal law to sanction irregular entry and/or stay) emerges as a key example of such deterrence, being a measure that (as of 2014) was employed by 26 out of 28 EU member states (see FRA 2014).

In this context, the increasing emphasis on deterrence throughout Europe may be at least partly (though not entirely - see Mudde 2013) related to the rise of populist radical right parties. On one hand, the latter have often *indirectly* influenced mainstream parties' agendas (Schain 2006). On the other hand, their success in winning government seats in recent years seems to have increasingly *directly* affected migration policies too (as in the case of the two Security Decrees passed in 2018-9 in Italy, which *inter alia* removed humanitarian protection and granted the Minister of the Interior the power to close ports - see Decree law No. 113/2018; Decree law No. 53/2019).



As a result of the increased emphasis on deterrence and border controls, migrants might thus be expected to have more knowledge on the penalties related to irregular entry and stay. Indeed, being the goal of deterrence to 'discourage and turn aside or restrain by fear' (Oxford English Dictionary 2016), a necessary element for the strategy to work is that potential rule-breakers are aware of the existing sanctions (Rosina 2019a, 105).

Overall, both the rise in information and communication technologies, globally, and the intense rhetoric surrounding restrictive border measures, in Europe, would suggest an increased degree of information held by migrants.

### **3. Migrants' knowledge of entry requirements and sanctions**

Is the assumption that migrants are more informed supported empirically? Available evidence suggests that information on the consequences of irregular migration is not always widespread and accurate among third country nationals.

To begin with, several studies are sceptical of the degree of information held by newcomers. Thielemann (2003), for instance, argues that governments in OECD countries often overestimate the degree of information held by asylum seekers. Likewise, Richardson (2010) finds that, out of 27 refugees she interviewed in Australia, "none had a detailed understanding of Australian immigration policies" before arrival (Richardson 2010, 9).

This is indeed supported by the results of the questionnaires carried out by the author among third country nationals in Italy and France, as the majority of respondents resulted unaware of the measures sanctioning irregular migration in the two countries. As an example, among the respondents based in Italy, 59% were unaware of the consequences of entering the country irregularly, and 74% were oblivious of the documents needed to do so legally. Specifically, very few migrants knew of the norms criminalising migration: When presented with a list of options, only 2% of respondents correctly identified 'fines' as among the consequences of irregular migration in Italy. Similarly, none of the respondents in France were aware of the possibility of being imprisoned for irregularly entering the country. Knowledge of the possibility of being returned was found to be relatively more widespread (with 22% of migrants in Italy knowing about it, 60% in France). Importantly, however, only a minority of respondents said they

had learnt about existing sanctions *before* leaving their countries (35% in Italy, 20% in France).

Adding to the above, information has been found by several studies as being largely passed on through personal networks, even in the age of the internet (see, for example, Richardson 2010, 11; IOM 2011, 14; Newell et al. 2016). As an example, Fiedler (2019, 334-6) finds that for Syrian and Iraqi refugees on the way to Germany, information gathered through personal contacts was key both before migration and while in transit, when keeping in touch with other migrants became crucial. Further, while the above-mentioned research by Dekker and others shows that smartphones and social media are greatly used by Syrian refugees *en route* to Europe, it also highlights that the latter tend to privilege information gathered through personal connections, rather than that posted on the internet by unknown persons (Dekker et al. 2018, esp. 5, 7, 8). Respondents of the study reported that the internet was not greatly used to get in touch with smugglers either, as it was more common to simply meet them on Turkish streets (Dekker et al. 2018, 6). The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) too recognised that information is mainly gathered through informal networks, as exemplified by the attempt, in the context of an information campaign in Cameroon in the early 2000s, to increase awareness by relying on both formal media (TV, radio, newspapers), and informal networks (e.g. by inviting returnees to speak about the dangers of migration) (Heller 2014, 312-3). Finally, in the North American context, Newell and others similarly discover that interviewed migrants on the US-Mexico border relied primarily on word-of-mouth information (either in person or through mobile phones), with 'ICTs only supplement[ing]' such practices (Newell et al. 2016, 181).

Again, the questionnaires conducted by the author support such findings, by showing that, among the migrants interviewed, the internet played a secondary role in informing migrants, when compared to personal networks. Indeed, the majority of third country nationals in Italy (58%) reported having learnt about the sanctions for irregular entry through friends, family, or other people. On the contrary, only 12% of them declared having relied on the internet. Interestingly, such results are paralleled by a survey carried out by the IOM among young people in Egypt in 2011 (who had at the time not yet migrated). Out of a pool of 750 respondents, the vast majority (75%) reported relying predominantly on friends and relatives to gather information on migration (IOM 2011, 14). In

contrast, the report finds that 35% of respondents used the internet, i.e. a significantly lower proportion.

In light of the relevance of personal networks in providing information, it should be stressed that knowledge passed in such a way carries the risk of not being accurate. First, interviews conducted by the author in Italy, as well as several studies, highlight that migrants in Europe often hide the hardships and suffering experienced, when communicating with relatives or friends at home (Richardson 2010; Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2008, 8; Talani 2010, 193). Indeed, while most of the refugees interviewed by Fiedler reported being well informed on the risks of the journey to Germany and of crossing the Mediterranean, it still came as a “bitter disappointment” to many of them to then experience difficulties in accessing jobs or family reunification, once in Germany (Fiedler 2019, 335, 343; see also Würger 2016). Second, smugglers may possess more accurate information, but likely also have incentives to emphasise the likelihood of success, so as to make a profit (see, for example, Kingsley 2015). As a matter of fact, a staff member from the Iraqi Media Network interviewed by Fiedler (2019, 339) reported concerns about refugees being victims of “tricks on *Facebook*”.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note here a last, interesting point, regarding the use of ICTs by migrants: The possibility of them turning into liabilities. While mobile phones enable connections with previous migrants and family, they could also lead to abuse. This is hypothesised by Newell and others (2016, 184) in the context of Central and South American migration to the US, as smugglers and mafias may take migrants’ phones, and call their families or contacts, with the aim of extorting money from them. A similar situation is easy to see happening on the journey to Europe too, however, as migrants have reported episodes of smugglers in Libyan detention centres calling their families and using physical violence or electric cables to make them scream while on the phone, so as to convince relatives to pay (see Melissari 2019; similarly, Bartolo 2018, 21).

Overall, although ICTs allow migrants to interact with families and obtain details, especially through mobile phones and social media, it seems that information is not necessarily always held, or accurate. Indeed, based on the questionnaires conducted and further studies, potential migrants’ knowledge appears to have

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<sup>3</sup> Although the relevance of the statement is challenged by Fielder as potentially a case of the respondent being convinced that the media may have a greater effect on “more gullible others”, than on themselves, it seems to the author an important observation.

been limited in several cases, and more reliant on personal networks than on the internet.

#### **4. Understanding the paradox: uneven globalisation and multiple audiences**

Linking the above discussion to the globalisation of information and to the emphasis placed on deterrence in European countries, how can we make sense of the evidence suggesting that migrants often seem to lack information? I suggest here that elements intrinsically related to the two trends may in fact aggravate migrants' disinformation.

##### *4.1 Uneven spread of ICTs among and within countries*

To begin with, considering the diffusion of ICTs, migrants' lack of information is in fact consistent with the former's uneven nature. Indeed, despite the increased innovations in information and communication technologies, their diffusion is still unbalanced, both among countries and groups within them (Dicken 2011, 91; Talani 2017). As an example, in spite of the significant growth in international information flows over the last two decades, advanced economies were still significantly more integrated in terms of information exchanges than emerging ones in 2018, by a ratio of 9:1 (Altman et al. 2019, 17-8). In particular, sub-Saharan Africa emerged as the least globally connected region with regards to information, followed by South and Central Asia, and then the Middle East and North Africa (Altman et al. 2019, 46). Similarly, disentangling the number of internet users by region, it becomes apparent that, while in OECD countries, 83% of the population used the internet in 2018, the figure drops to 65% for the Middle East and North Africa in the same year, and to 25% in sub-Saharan Africa in 2017 (World Bank 2020). Interestingly, such regions are also among the ones currently originating most of the irregular migratory flows to Europe (see Eurostat 2020).

Within countries too, specific groups are less likely to have access to information and technologies. This is exemplified by the gender gap in the use of the internet, which is not only higher in developing countries than in developed ones, but also increasing: In 2019, developing countries' gap in their male and female internet penetration rates stood at 23%, compared to 16% in

2013, and 2% in developed countries today (ITU 2019, 3). Several of the countries with high gender gaps in internet access have a similarly significant gap in the ownership of mobile phones (which is especially relevant in selected African countries, as well as in the Middle East and south Asia) (ITU 2019, 6). Furthermore, the digital divide (that is, the divide in the degree of access to digital services and the internet, Wessels 2013), seems to parallel the rural-urban divide (Alzouma 2013). This is exemplified by the cases of Egypt where, as of 2008, roughly 3% of rural households had access to the internet (Roccu 2013, 5), and of Niger, where in the same year 84% of rural councils lacked GSM coverage (Alzouma 2013, 301). Finally, education has also been found as strongly related to access to digital technologies: According to the OECD (2015, 50-52), computer skills are significantly associated to literacy skills, and illiteracy may indeed be a significant obstacle to internet access (Alzouma 2013, 303).

As the above suggests, although access to ICTs is increasing, this does not appear evenly widespread. Within countries, the digital divide appears related to gender, education, and origin community cleavages (Alzouma 2005, 343). Importantly, such aspects may also be interrelated, and thus further aggravate selected groups' access to digital technologies. This is well exemplified by the difference in the ability of male and female adults to read and write in several developing countries: In 2018, literacy rates in the Middle East and North Africa region stood at 85% for men, and 72% for women (World Bank 2020). In the same year, in sub-Saharan Africa, they were 73% and 59%, respectively (World Bank 2020).

As a matter of fact, despite the increasing diffusion of the internet, potential and actual migrants do not necessarily have the same level of access to it as people in Western countries (Richardson 2010, 11). According to the UNHCR (2016, 8), at the global level, "refugees are 50 per cent less likely than the general population to have an internet-enabled phone, and 29 per cent of refugee households have no phone at all". Moreover, it has been argued that a digital divide exists among migrants too, and that it may be exacerbated by individual and technological factors (such as language skills and device availability), as well as by social barriers, with special difficulties for women and the elderly (Mancini et al 2019, 12, 13, 19; see also UNHCR 2016).

Specifically, in parallel to the argument made above, differences seem to emerge both in relation to varying countries of origin, and of social groups within them. Richardson (2010), among others, finds that access to information (on the

Australian immigration system) is very dependent on the countries from which migrants come, with individuals from Iran and Iraq, for instance, having higher degrees of knowledge, than those from Afghanistan. At the same time, specific groups within such countries also emerge as being differently informed: Among the Afghan refugees interviewed by the author, for example, many belonged to the Hazara ethnic group, and reported having been prevented by the Taliban from attending school, thus having lower education levels (ibid.). Migrants' education is indeed found as strongly associated to their access to information and technologies by further studies. Zijlstra and van Liempt (2017), for example, argue that varying degrees of education, digital literacy, and English skills significantly affect migrants' capacity to benefit from mobile technologies while *en route* to Europe. Likewise, Latonero et al (2018, 22) find that, out of the over 130 migrants interviewed in a refugee camp in Greece, the likelihood of owning a mobile phone became greater with the increase in the education level of the respondents. Interestingly, the study also reports that women were less likely to possess a phone and to use it for money transfers, than men (67% of women had a phone, versus 94% of men; 7% of women used it to transfer money, versus 31% of men) (Latonero and others 2018, 21). Thus, gender emerged as affecting both ownership and use of mobile phones. More research would be needed to confirm the extent to which this is a generalised trend, although the lower literacy rates of women in Middle Eastern and African countries of origin (shown by the data above), would suggest so.

In sum, the often-scarce degree of migrants' awareness of sanctions, which was highlighted in Section 4, parallels in fact the uneven access to information and communication technologies that is present at the global level. Specifically, existing studies seem to support the view that the digital divide appears most evident when considering migrants' countries of origin, as well as their education level and gender.

#### *4.2 Deterrence and its multiple audiences*

Moving now to the increased emphasis on deterrence, it may be argued that the politicisation of migration could itself be one of the reasons contributing to migrants' lack of knowledge.

Building upon Freedman (2004)'s notion of deterrence as targeting multiple audiences, it is possible to argue that such measures are not only addressed at the notional audience (potential migrants), but also at secondary ones, notably

including the domestic public. When the latter assume more relevance, however, policies are likely to result incoherent (Rosina 2019a).

Indeed, the literature has often noted that, due to the high salience of unauthorised cross-border mobility, politicians tend to be under intense pressure to adopt visible and symbolic policies, to “create an *appearance* of control” (Massey et al. 1998, 288, as cited in de Haas 2006, 10, emphasis in original; similarly, Hollifield et al. 2014, 27). This is exemplified by the increased emphasis on building fences, both in Europe and beyond (see The Economist 2016).

In this context, it seems possible to interpret the current politicisation of migration, and emphasis on visible and symbolic measures, as privileging the concerns of the domestic public, rather than of migrants themselves (for a similar argument in the Australian context, see Richardson 2010, 8). This may be illustrated by the IOM information campaign [AwareMigrants](#), which – for instance – does not include any reference to the criminal sanctions foreseen by European states against irregular migration, despite all involved states using them (and often placing great emphasis on them) (see FRA 2014; EMN 2013; Rosina 2019b).

Interestingly, the domestic audience does not appear to be prioritised by populist parties only, but increasingly by mainstream ones too. As anticipated above, part of the shift to the right of immigration policy may be seen as an indirect consequence of the rise of populist parties, which, after gaining electoral breakthrough, may shape the agendas of mainstream right-, and sometimes left-, wing parties, and influence the public’s priorities (Schain 2006). Indeed, mainstream parties, choosing whether to co-opt or isolate populist radical right parties’ rhetoric and agenda, have on several occasions opted for the former option. France well exemplifies the trend, with both former Interior Minister and President Sarkozy, and the Socialist Party, toughening their stance on migration in response to the increasing success of the Front National since the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Marthaler 2008, 388-9; Schain 2006, 276, 283). Similarly, in Italy, when offered the possibility to decriminalise migration in 2014-6, the centre-left government headed by Renzi chose not to do so, arguing that “the people would not understand” (see Rosina 2019b; citation of Alfano, as appearing in Bei 2016).



Thus, tough rhetoric of migration control through deterrence is often prominent in Europe, both among populist and mainstream parties. Yet, on several occasions it seems to target more the domestic public, than migrants themselves, therefore failing to contribute to the latter's greater awareness of the consequences of irregular migration.

To conclude, as I have argued, the apparent paradox of migrants not necessarily having greater information, may in fact be explained by the uneven diffusion of ICTs, both among and within countries, and by the predominance of the domestic audience in several of the currently emphasised measures of deterrence.

## **5. The effects of information on potential migrants' choices**

As argued in the previous sections, surveys conducted by the author and previous studies suggest that migrants' degree of information may be limited. A question thus emerges: To increase potential migrants' awareness of the sanctions related to unauthorised migration, European countries may support information campaigns in countries of origin. Would such option succeed in reducing irregular migration? As will be argued in the next paragraphs, the answer, in short, seems to be negative.

In recent years, information campaigns have grown in number, and focused increasingly on African states (Heller 2014, 311). As an example, the EU expenditure on such campaigns has amounted to over 23million euro since 2015, in the framework of the Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (EMN 2019, 59). At the same time, however, evaluations of their results are often lacking, and rarely made public (Browne 2015; Tjaden et al. 2018; Heller 2014). What does the available evidence indicate, regarding information campaigns' potential for success?

From a theoretical perspective, two sets of arguments could be advanced to challenge the idea that more information would reduce unauthorised migration. First, from a macro-level viewpoint, transnationalist theories suggest that migration is a structural phenomenon, intrinsically related to uneven globalisation processes. From this perspective, it is systemic changes in both developing and developed countries that originate migration. On one hand (and largely thanks to the advancements in information and communication



technologies mentioned in Section 3), globalisation entails a global reallocation of production, which moves to specialised areas of the globe (including, for example, south-East Asia) (Mittleman 2000; Overbeek 1996; 2002; Talani 2010). While leading to the increased integration of such countries through regionalisation, however, such process also involves the increasing marginalisation of the areas that are not included in the reallocation of production (such as sub-Saharan Africa), thus stimulating out-flows (Talani 2010). On the other hand, in Western countries, the increasing reliance on flexible foreign (and often irregular) labour also contributes to sustain the “structurally embedded” demand for in-flows (Overbeek 2002; 1996; Mittleman 2000; Cornelius and Tsuda 2004, 9). Overall, from a transnationalist perspective, the processes that underlie migration (even in its irregular forms) make it unlikely for increased knowledge to significantly contribute to reducing the phenomenon, as this is in fact related to deeper, more structural, dynamics.

Adding to the above, a second set of arguments may be proposed, which focus on the micro-level and stress the relevance of understanding how migrants *interpret* information (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007, 1685-6; Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2008; Alpes 2012). Here, migrants are seen as “active audiences”, who thus do not simply passively accept new information, but rather process it (Richardson 2010, 13), and who may be affected by psychological factors, such as cognitive biases. According to the latter hypothesis, indeed, individuals tend to prefer information that is consistent with existing beliefs, and to thus ignore, deny or discount contrasting information (Lebow 2007, 72-5; Stein 2009, 63). Evidence of such behaviour is interestingly found by Carling and Hernández-Carretero (2008), in their study of pirogue migration from Senegal in the late 2000s. From their analysis, migrants emerge not so much as unaware of the risks of (irregular) migration, but rather as implementing a number of counterstrategies to minimise them. As an example, they would stress their experiences as fishermen to highlight that their risk of drowning was mitigated, depict campaigns as biased and untrustworthy, or avoid negative information. Similarly, Fiedler argues that among the Syrian and Iraqi refugees interviewed in Germany in 2015-6, several turned a blind eye to “information that contradicted their ‘idealized’ version of the destination country” (Fiedler 2019, 342), which led to many experiencing distress and disillusionment once in Europe (Fiedler 2019, 343). As a further example, focusing on an information campaign conducted in Cameroon, Heller reports that several individuals reacted to it by laughing, in a clear manifestation of dissent and resistance

(Heller 2014, 314). Interestingly, the IOM itself acknowledged that “the decision to migrate is not entirely rational in the straightforward sense of evaluating pros and cons and then making a decision. It is governed by personal beliefs and desires, hearsay, wishful thinking, and stereotypes” (IOM website, as cited in Heller 2014, 311). In short, from a micro-level perspective too, multiple studies suggest that, even when migrants know the sanctions in place, they may not be deterred by them.

The above scepticism seems supported by both several studies and the author’s questionnaires. To begin with, a recent study carried out by Tjaden and others (2018) for the IOM finds that the results of information campaigns targeting irregular migration and trafficking in human beings are unclear, and that declarations of success are often affected by methodological issues. Specifically, reviewing the evaluations of 65 information campaigns conducted across Africa, Europe, Asia and America, the study finds that: Out of 19 campaigns aiming to influence *behaviour*, 9 were successful (49%); out of 11 campaigns targeted at changing *attitudes*, 6 were successful (52%); out of 26 and 35 campaigns with the goal of influencing *knowledge* and *awareness*, respectively, 23 and 31 were successful (89%) (Tjaden et al. 2018, 27). In short, campaigns aimed at influencing *attitudes* or *behaviour* were unsuccessful in roughly half of the cases, whereas those targeted at affecting *knowledge* and *awareness* had more positive results. As anticipated above, however, the study shows concern with the evaluation methodologies: To begin with, for over 60% of the evaluations, the reliability and generalisability of findings was considered low, due to factors including the limited number of participants surveyed (Tjaden et al. 2018, 24-6). Moreover, campaigns should clarify whether their aim is to affect migrants’ knowledge, attitudes or behaviour, and measure results accordingly (ibid.)<sup>4</sup>. Finally, a “publication bias” may also exist, according to the authors, according to which studies finding positive effects are more likely to be published (ibid.). As a result, the above seems to leave space for doubts regarding information campaigns’ effect on reducing irregular migration.

The analysis of the surveys carried out by the author would also back up such scepticism: Asked whether knowing the consequences of irregular migration made them change their mind on how to migrate, 70% of respondents in Italy

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is also interesting to note that, while several campaigns emphasise the hardships of migrating irregularly, few direct people towards pathways for doing so regularly (Pécoud 2010, 194). In the case of the campaigns studied by Tjaden and others (2018, 23), only 8 of them “emphasised alternatives to irregular migration”.

said that it did not, and the same is true for all respondents in France. Indeed, this is consistent with some voices in the literature and among cultural mediators interviewed by the author, who stress that migrants may know the risks and sanctions involved in irregular migration, but are not deterred by them (see, for example, Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2008; Dekker et al. 2018). As an example, both Carling and Hernández-Carretero (2008) and Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud (2007, 1685-6) argue that knowing the hardships and dangers of migration does not necessarily reduce migrants' intention to flee.

Likewise, as mentioned above, several studies find evidence of migrants suspecting that the police may track their smartphones and thus simply putting in place counterstrategies, including turning off their phones or using coded language (Dekker and others 2018, 7; Mancini et al. 2019, 8). Although the extent to which the latter type of choices are migrants', or smugglers', should be questioned, there seems to be evidence suggesting that knowledge does not necessarily discourage departures. Instead, substitution effects may ensue.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, despite the deterrence-based depiction of migration as a rational choice, there seems to be reason to doubt that more and accurate information would change potential migrants' perspectives. As I have suggested, this may be understood from both a macro- and micro-level viewpoint, by stressing the structural dynamics underlying migration, and the psychological biases that make people frequently averse to contrasting information.

## **Conclusion**

Both the spread of information and communication technologies, and the increased emphasis on measures of deterrence in Europe, would suggest at first sight an increasing degree of knowledge among potential migrants of the sanctions related to irregular entry and stay. Yet, based on questionnaires with migrants in Italy and France, and secondary literature, this paper has argued that this is not necessarily always the case. Indeed, migrants' knowledge emerged as limited in several cases, often deriving more from personal networks (smugglers, family and friends), than the internet.

The article has suggested that the apparent contradiction of such results with the growth of ICTs and emphasis on deterrence, finds an explanation in the two

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the different types of substitution effects, see de Haas (2011).

latter factors themselves. First, migrants' often-limited awareness reflects the uneven diffusion of the internet at the global level, both among countries and social groups within them (with sub-Saharan African countries, and especially women, in a weaker position). Second, the above may also be understood by viewing deterrence measures in Europe as frequently targeted at the domestic audiences, rather than at potential migrants themselves.

Finally, available evidence suggests that even when migrants' awareness is higher, this does not necessarily lead them to choose non-migration. At the micro-level, part of this may be explained with reference to psychological biases against contrasting information. More fundamentally, at the macro-level, viewing migration as a structural phenomenon leads to significant doubts on the potential effectiveness of deterrence, even in a context of perfect information.

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