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Characteristics of migrants coming to Europe: A survey among asylum seekers and refugees in Germany about their journey

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Abstract

The year 2015 was significant in the history of the EU when millions of asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle East and Africa fled to Europe. Where some European countries accept immigrants from non-EU regions, others blame migrants for taking advantage of the social systems in Europe and followed restrictive policy measures. Thus, everyone speaks about migrants, but not with migrants. The article examines the characteristics of asylum seekers and refugees and their motives for coming to Europe. Over 100 interview-based surveys were conducted in this study. The findings of the paper show who these people are and from where they originated. Furthermore, there is evidence supporting the hypothesis that the majority of people flee because of severe danger (e.g., armed conflicts) and are not 'economic migrants' despite the claims of nationalistic governments in the EU.

Keywords: *Refugees; asylum seekers; migration; characteristics of migrants; European Union.*

Introduction

The influx of millions of immigrants from the Middle East and the African continent in the year 2015 was a turning point in EU migration policies. Since then, migration has become a highly controversial topic in civil societies, but also with policy-makers, politics, and migration studies. This topic divided and polarized the EU into countries that are willing to accept asylum seekers and refugees, and the member states that are not. Consequently, the conflict has the potential to stop the European integration process, which itself is already damaged after the crisis of the Eurozone (Manners and Murray, 2016). Other authors even see the Brexit Movement as a consequence of anti-immigration agitation in British media (Goodman and Narang, 2019).

However, citizens of EU states are talking about asylum seekers and refugees, but only a few talk with them. Who are these people? Where do they come from? Moreover, what were their motives for coming to Europe? The main research question of the study is, 'What are the characteristics of those coming to Europe, and are they economic migrants or refugees?'. There are still uncertainties related to these questions, and this paper aims to fill that gap.

The article examines 103 interview-based questionnaires with asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. First of all, the study provides the characteristics of the sample regarding their age, gender, citizenship, and profession. After that, I interviewed them about their journey, goals, and desires. The findings of the research indicate that people mainly originate from (civil) war zones and flee because of severe conditions. A significant number of asylum seekers and refugees enter the EU by sea and, therefore, the Mediterranean Sea countries, Greece and Italy, are the primary

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destinations for fleeing persons. During their journey to Europe, more than 50 percent of the interview participants paid smugglers. According to the sample size, the vast majority are relatively young males and do not have any intention of moving back to the country of origin. The 'economic migrants' claims of populistic EU governments cannot be confirmed in this study.

Why do Asylum Seekers & Refugees move? Asylum Seekers and Refugees vs. Economic Migrants

The essential question in migration studies is 'Why do people move?'. There is no single universal answer to this question. There are countless reasons and different circumstances, which influence individuals and their decision-making processes in terms of migration. In this paper, I argue that refugees and asylum seekers flee primarily because of severe threats to their life and not due to economic reasons.

However, the conflict model of Sirkeci (2009) shows the complexity of the topic since economic migrants have to be also considered as a result of conflicts. Whereas Koser (2007) neglects the role of the refugees and asylum seekers in transnationalism studies, Sirkeci (2009) sees refugees and asylum seekers as 'the prime examples for the development of a conflict-oriented model of transnational migration because these two groups exemplify few of the various conflict situations' (Sirkeci, 2009: 5). Sirkeci's conflict model distinguishes between 'seeking human security' and 'avoiding human insecurity,' as well as between potential, latent, and violent conflicts. The transnational space (Rummell, 1976) is continuously influenced, changed, and restructured by certain factors in terms of migration and conflicts. Thus, transnational mobility operates at macro, mezzo, and micro levels of conflict. In conclusion, 'migration is a search for (human) security' (Sirkeci, 2009: 12).

Sirkeci et al. (2012) describe migration as fluid processes in a dynamic environment. The 'culture of migration' is the result of this conceptual framework. It considers economic and political aspects (e.g., social expectations, opportunities, conflicts, security, and insecurity), the dimension of space and time, and social-cultural influence. Local, transnational, and macro-level processes are in the center of conflicts. As the example of migration from Turkey to Germany illustrates national and transnational conflicts, differences in socio-economic developments, ethnic conflicts, and socio-economic deprivation had a significant impact on migration decisions in the past decades (Sirkeci et al., 2012: 34). Consequently, migration between these two countries has transformed from a cooperative to a conflict based approach (Sirkeci et al., 2012; Sirkeci, 2009).

According to King (2012), Castles (2010), Faist (2010), and Portes (2010), there are currently two significant trends, which can be observed in migration studies. The first one is the approach to bring migration studies out of isolation and to integrate them in the field of social change and social transformation. Therefore, migration becomes part of national and global social change. However, there is a certain level of disagreement regarding the depth of these changes. While Portes argues these changes exist, the impact of migration on the social structure of the host country and its society is rather small (2010: 1556). Castles emphasizes that movement transforms social structures, institutions, and the whole global economy. Hence, Castles (2010) argues for deeper integration of migration studies in the field of social sciences by demanding an interdisciplinary approach, since migration affects 'all dimensions of human experience' (2010: 1596). The second trend goes in a similar direction. King (2012) states that migration theories were very much influenced by qualitative sociology, anthropology, human geography, and cultural studies since the early 1990s,

and has shifted 'from quantitatively inclined population geography to qualitatively-minded cultural geography' (2012: 24; Blunt 2007). This development did not focus so strongly on the migration reasons anymore, but rather on the migration 'experience' (King, 2012: 25).

Nevertheless, transnationalism in terms of migration should not be overestimated, since not every international migrant has a 'transnational life' or occupies 'transnational social space' (Faist, 2000; King, 2012). Portes (2003: 876) emphasizes that only a minority of migrants fit into the transnational approach and sees a bias in research which focuses mainly on transnational migrants. King (2012) concludes that the transnational approach, which derives from networks, is a challenge for the push-pull model, and criticizes the overwhelming amount of literature concerning integration and assimilation of migrants at their destination.

Other works, which examined the neoclassical models, analyzed certain aspects of the theory instead of trying to develop new generalized models. Economic reasons were no longer the reasons for flight, and (civil) wars gained more attention in terms of migration movements from asylum seekers and refugees. Davenport et al. (2003) investigated the situation of IDPs (internally displaced persons) by conducting empirical research and focused primarily on political threats as a reason to flee. According to Davenport et al., political threats have a much more significant influence on migration movements than economic factors. The difference between this approach and prior studies is that people have a choice to stay or leave, and their actions are not just the outcome of a 'stimulus-response mechanism.' A similar approach was made by Melander and Öberg (2007). The authors analyzed the relationship between forced migration and any form of violence (e.g., civil wars). At the same time, Davenport et al. (2003) focused on human rights. The results of the research emphasize the severe influence of armed conflicts and political threats in the framework of forced migration.

The implications for the migration movements to Europe since 2015 are still relevant since the majority of refugees came from civil war countries (e.g., Syria). However, it is also important to keep in mind that people are more flexible because of the enormous infrastructure and communication possibilities today. In the past, many people from emerging countries were not fully aware of the living conditions in the Western world. Not everyone was simply satisfied by getting geographically away from the conflict zone. This observation also applies to refugee camps. Providing poor living conditions might not be enough anymore to prevent people from leaving for more developed countries (e.g., the EU).

Whereas previous studies focused very much on push factors, Neumayer (2004; 2005) elaborated on the question of which particular preferences asylum seekers have concerning their destination (pull factors). Neumayer's findings show that economic conditions in countries of origin are relevant factors for asylum seekers coming to Western Europe. The same applies to the political regime, threats to personal integrity like human rights abuse, dissident political violence, civil/ethnic warfare, state failure, and external conflict. The lack of democracy in the country of origin also increases asylum migration, according to his applied variables. Neumayer's results show evidence that countries with left-wing governments are, according to their recognition rate, more migration-friendly than right-wing governments, which are perceived to be more restrictive. In general, more prosperous countries receive a higher per capita share of asylum seekers. These findings are consistent with Moore and Shellman (2007). Their global analysis shows evidence that fear of persecution, wages, culture, and the costs of the relocation also play a role in migration decision-making processes. According to the authors, refugees do not make their decisions on the

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level of violence concerning their destination (except for genocides). Likewise, they also do not flee primarily to countries that support (political) freedom or offer significant economic opportunities. Moore and Shellman conclude that refugees mainly seek asylum in neighboring countries, especially if their original homeland is affected by war or civil war. Refugees who are fleeing to other countries also follow their colonial ties. Nonetheless, there are some examples like the US or Germany, which are always among the top migrant destinations. Overall, the literature suggests that people flee because of severe reasons, which is consistent with the findings of this study.

Methods & Research Design

The research is quantitative and based on interview questionnaires with asylum seekers and refugees in Germany who migrated to Germany in 2015 or later. The study was conducted in the Bavarian region of Germany, which is the area I come from, and that receives the second most asylum applications of all Bundesländer in Germany (Statista 2020a; 2020b). Regarding the sample size, I used the snowball method. My mother, who is a certified teacher for German as a foreign language, works with asylum seekers and refugees in Germany and organized contact with some of her students. From this point, participants of the research project recruited friends and members of their community to further interviews. The only prerequisites were that participants had to be of legal age and a legitimate asylum seeker or refugee in Germany, which makes the preselection process homogenous. However, these were the only restrictions that existed in terms of sample size. In general, I followed a maximum variation/heterogeneous approach.

All the interviews were conducted in person, orally, and in German or English. Because of language barriers that existed in many cases, various people from the same origin as the participants helped with the translation of the face-to-face interviews. I asked the questions and filled in the questionnaire. In total, I conducted 103 interviews with asylum seekers and refugees from spring 2019 until the end of winter 2020. There were no financial incentives for the interviews, and every participant was at least 18 years old. The result of the research are 100 percent anonymous, randomized, and kept confidential.

The interviews were fully structured, and every participant received the same questions. The first question is about the basic demographic background of the participants (age, gender, citizenship, and profession). It aims to answer the question of who these people are. The importance of this question is to find out if certain groups or demographics are more likely to be part of migration movements than others. The second question asks about the reasons for leaving their countries of origin and offers different options from severe reasons (e.g., wars) to economic reasons. The third question continues in a similar direction by asking the participants why they chose the EU as their destination. Again, people could choose between politically-motivated and economic-related answers or others. Whereas political fleeing reasons indicate severe threats to the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, economic-related answers would confirm the economic migrants' narrative. These questions also allowed multiple answers because migrants may have more than one migration motive.

Questions number three, four, and five are journey specific and address the topic of where and how people entered the EU. The focus of this section is on the Mediterranean Sea countries of the EU due to their proximity to the Middle East and the African continent. Entering the EU by crossing the dangerous Mediterranean Sea and paying smugglers are indicators of genuine fleeing reasons. Economic migrants are considered not as less likely to risk their lives on high seas, nor to have the financial capabilities to pay smugglers.

Last but not least, the interviews conclude by asking the question of people's intention of going back to their country of origin (holidays and short-term visits not included).

The research has, of course, also some limitations and weaknesses. Because of the snowball method that I used, all the interviews were conducted only in one region of Germany (Bavaria). Likewise, no classification by specific demographic groups was made (e.g., 50 percent interviews with males, 50 percent with females, or grouping by age, origin, time in camps, et cetera), which makes the study not wholly representative. Other possible limitations and weaknesses of the work are:

- Language Barrier: Since a translator was sometimes needed, some incidences of 'lost in translation' based on misunderstandings or wrong translations occur.
- Lack of interest or motivation: Some people might have been just not interested in the interviews and did not care about their answers.
- Sabotage: This case is similar to the previous one. We cannot exclude that people lied on purpose to sabotage the results of the research.
- Uncomfortable atmosphere: Some people could have felt uncomfortable during the interviews by answering private questions.
- Politically or culturally motivated answers: Due to personal preferences, some answers could exaggerate positively and negatively (being extreme bias). For example, one person does not want to talk badly about another country (cultural reasons), or one person dislikes the political views of individual governments (political reasons). In both cases, the answers could tremendously differ from the 'truth.'

However, the last points are pure speculation and are possible factors that could have influenced the results of the interviews. At the end of the conducted study, I should be able to make some strong statements on asylum seekers and refugees in Germany regarding their background, motive, aspirations moving to Europe, and plans.

Results & Discussion

The evaluation of the results starts with the characteristics of the participants. The four main categories are 'Age,' 'Gender,' 'Citizenship,' and 'Profession.' Hence, the data tells us where asylum seekers and refugees come from and to which demographics they belong.

The first noticeable fact is that the vast majority of the migrants are very young. Over 50 percent are under 30 years of age, and 28.2 percent are between 30 and 49 years. People over 50 years are already migrating significantly less than the previous demographics and migration over 65 becomes very unlikely, with under 5 percent. The trend shows that movement is an activity of the young, which is not very surprising since immigrating to another country requires lots of energy, resources, and health. The elderly that got interviewed in this section were part of family reunification processes and had relatively safe ways of entering the EU. At the same time, the young people took the dangerous paths on their journey to Europe (e.g., crossing the Mediterranean Sea).

The second important observation is that more migrants are male than female. Indeed, cultural or religious reasons might have played a role in the selection of interview partners as well, but, in general, there were more men (60.2 percent) than women (39.8) available. A reason for this could be that mainly young men are fleeing to Europe, who leave their families behind. They aim to reach

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Europe in insecure ways and, after the clarification of their asylum status, their families follow on safe routes (e.g., by airplane). These numbers are also consistent with findings of the 'Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF)' and the 'Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (BPB)' (2020), who investigated the demographics of asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. As state institutions, they have, of course, more resources to conduct more sophisticated research in this field. According to their statistics, the ratio between men and women was approximately always between 60 percent (men) and 40 percent (women) in recent years. Concerning the age of migrants, the trend that 'migration is for the youth' is confirmed. The biggest group is between 0 and 15 years old (about 40 percent).[2] The older the demographic gets, the fewer asylum seekers and refugees migrate to Europe, respectively, to Germany.

Table 1. Evaluation of the Characteristics of the Participants.

Characteristics of Participants					
	n	%		n	%
Age			**Gender**		
18 - 29	54	52.4	Male	62	60.2
30 - 49	29	28.2	Female	41	39.8
50 - 64	15	14.6			
65 +	5	4.9			
Citizenship			**Profession**		
Syria	38	36.9	Unemployed	22	21.4
Iraq	29	28.2	Student	33	32.0
Eritrea	14	13.6	Farmer	10	9.7
Afghanistan	5	4.9	Housewife	9	8.7
Palestine	3	2.9	Soldier	4	3.9
Jordan	4	3.9	Construction	4	3.9
Yemen	5	4.9	Salesperson	4	3.9
Other	5	4.9	Other	17	16.5

The category 'Citizenship' is supposed to localize the origin of the migrants. It does not automatically mean that people are coming from the country where they originated from, but it should provide a basic overview.[3] The biggest group in this category is by far people with Syrian citizenship (36.9 percent), followed by Iraq (28.2 percent) and Eritrea (13.6 percent). The other countries that are reflected in the interviews are Afghanistan, Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, and others. All of these countries suffer tremendously from war, conflicts, and political instability. The high number of Syrian asylum seekers are the direct consequence of the Syrian Civil War and mass migration movements to the EU since 2015. Again, the results of the interviews are in line with the statistics of the BAMF and the BPB (2020). Syrians are currently, overall, the biggest group of asylum seekers in Germany. The main difference to the interview results is that official German data also recognizes a relatively high number of asylum seekers from Europe (e.g., Russia or Moldova), countries that had no priority in this research. Many of the participants in the interviews were still students (32 percent), which derives from the average young age of the interview partners. Overall, various jobs are represented, including farmers, homemakers, construction workers, soldiers, or salespersons. Nevertheless, the second biggest group are unemployed persons (21.4

[2] A group that is not reflected in the interviews because every interview partner had to be at least 18 years old.
[3] Theoretically, somebody can be a Syrian citizen but live in a different country.

percent), respectively, people with no real profession. Professions that are summarized under 'other' are, for example, barbers, tailors, policemen, and teachers.

The first question asked asylum seekers and refugees about the reasons for leaving their country of origin. Unfortunately, wars and armed conflicts (38.3 percent) are, by far, the main reason for people leaving their country of origin. Notably, a significant number of Syrian asylum seekers were profoundly affected by the (civil) war in Syria and decided to migrate to Europe. Still, people from almost every country in the study suffered from violent conflicts, a result that is consistent with previous research (Davenport et al. 2003; Melander and Öberg 2007).

Table 1. Evaluation of Question 1 of the Interviews.

Q1: What was the (major) reason for you leaving the country of your origin? Please circle all that apply.		
	n	%
(Civil) War or Armed Conflict(s)	72	38.3
Political Persecution	41	21.8
Discrimination	13	6.9
Natural Disasters	6	3.2
Economic Reasons / Poverty	22	11.7
Climate change-related reason	2	1.1
Seeking a higher living standard in the EU	14	7.4
Other	18	9.6

The second primary reason is political persecution (21.8 percent). This issue is very often related to autocratic regimes and armed conflicts. 'Economic reasons and poverty' were the third most common response (11.7 percent). Therefore, the research shows that the vast majority of respondents had severe reasons for fleeing; the claims of nationalist governments in the EU, who refer to refugees as 'economic migrants,' are not valid. These findings are in line with research results from Neumayer (2004; 2005), Moore and Shellman (2007), and Tétényi et al. (2018).

In fact, there is never only 'one' reason to flee any situation, and various sets of different variables influence asylum seekers in their decision-making process regarding migration. There are other pull and push factors, as well. Wealthy and economically successful states are, of course, attractive destinations for migrants. Still, the dominant factors remain significant threats to the life and well-being of individuals. Natural disasters (3.2 percent) and climate change (1.1 percent) played only a minor role, as well as 'discrimination' (6.9 percent) and 'seeking a higher living standard in the EU' (7.4 percent). The other reasons included, for example, family or network-related answers.

It is also necessary to ask the question the other way around by identifying the main reasons asylum seekers come to Europe to understand the pull factors behind the decision-making process.

Overall, the results of the question, as mentioned above, correspond with the results of the previous section. Consequently, a 'peaceful and secure environment' dominates with 34.1 percent of the total answers given, followed by 'political stability' (17.1 percent) and 'human rights' (17.5 percent). Since armed conflicts and political prosecution are the dominating flight factors in the interviews, the answers meet the expectations. First and foremost, asylum seekers in the EU are seeking security. Luckily, the EU exists in a period of peace, and any form of military confrontation among Member states is unlikely. This increases the popularity of the European Union tremendously as a destination for migrants suffering from war.

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Table 3. Evaluation of Question 2 of the Interviews.

Q2: What was the main reason for you coming to the EU? Please circle all that apply.		
	n	%
Peaceful and secure environment	72	34.1
Political stability	36	17.1
Human rights (open and free society)	37	17.5
Cultural aspects	20	9.5
Higher living standard	26	12.3
Other	20	9.5

Moreover, the EU guarantees freedom, stability, and human rights. Political persecution is very unlikely. 'Higher living standard' (12.3 percent) is only of relatively small relevance in this context. Some of the interview partners even appreciate the cultural diversity in Europe (9.5 percent), and other reasons, include, again, mostly family and networks.

According to the Dublin system, asylum seekers have to apply for asylum where they step foot for the first time in the EU. Therefore, the question of where people entered the EU is crucial.

Table 4. Evaluation of Question 3 of the Interviews.

Q3: What was the country where you entered the EU for the first time?		
	n	%
Greece	46	44.7
Italy	27	26.2
Spain	7	6.8
Bulgaria	3	2.9
Hungary	1	1.0
Other countries	19	18.4

The main destinations for asylum seekers are, not surprisingly, Greece (44.7 percent) and Italy (26.2 percent). The accessibility of these countries due to their Mediterranean Sea location makes them EU hotspots for asylum seeker arrivals. Whereas Greece is attractive for refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Italy has always been a destination for migration movements from Africa. However, in recent years, Greece has been more affected by a migration influx because of the civil war in Syria and other armed conflicts in the Middle East region. Spain (6.8 percent), Bulgaria (2.9 percent), and Hungary (1 percent) as destination countries, only play minor roles in this regard. The relatively high number of other countries (18.4 percent) can be explained mainly by family reunification and people who entered the EU via tourist visas but decided to stay.

Consequently, question number 4 asks how did people come to the EU, and question number 5 tackles the issue of smuggling.

The most common way of entering the EU is by sea (62.1 percent), followed by land (21.4 percent) and airplanes (14.6. percent). The Mediterranean countries are mostly affected by sea arrivals. Greece and Bulgaria are often entered by land due to their border with Turkey, even though the external borders of the EU are highly protected. Entering the EU by airplane is less common, but still happens. Again, family reunification and tourist visas make this possible and allow people to enter their destination country without going through other EU states.

Table 5. Evaluation of Question 4 and Question 5 of the Interviews.

Q4: How did you arrive in the EU?			**Q5: Did you pay any smugglers to enter the EU?**		
	n	%		n	%
By land	64	21.4	Yes	58	58.6
By sea	15	62.1	No	41	41.4
By airplane	2	14.6			
Other		1.9			

The majority (58.6 percent) paid smugglers to enter the EU and to reach their destination. The difference between smuggling and human trafficking is the exploitive character of human trafficking (Herkes, 2018). Moreover, there is very often a misperception of smuggling. Whereas smuggling is often described as responsible for massive human rights violations (EC, 2020), the reality is more complex and nuanced.

Smugglers are very often friends or family members of migrants who are not necessarily interested primarily in profit-maximization, but instead trying to help people during their journey (Zhang et al., 2018; Achilli, 2018; Maher, 2018; Mengiste, 2018). Many of the interview partners were able to confirm these impressions. People described the relationship with their smugglers as 'trustworthy' and 'friendly.' Unfortunately, black sheep do exist in this field, and they were mostly concerned about their profit, instead of focusing on safe entry opportunities for their clients. Orientation issues can explain the two answers in the category 'other.' Sometimes people do not realize when, where, and how they cross a border. Uncertainty always remains, and, therefore, these people did not know if they entered the EU first by land or by sea since perfect border controls do not exist.

The last question asks asylum seekers if they have the intention of going back to their country of origin in the future.

Table 2. Evaluation of Question 6 of the Interviews.

Q6: Did/do you have any intention of going back to your country of origin?		
	n	%
Yes	9	8.7
No	82	79.6
I do not know yet	12	11.7

The response to this question was overwhelmingly negative (79.6 percent). Only a small minority of 8.7 percent has the intention of returning to the country of origin, and 11.7 percent are undecided. In truth, 'returning' means migrating back and not just visiting family or friends. Many more would like to return as visitors to their home country if the situation should significantly change one day. In general, we can say once people have made their decision to immigrate, they are not willing to go back, especially not after all they went through to build up a new life elsewhere. Asylum seekers and refugees want stability, security, and long-term prosperity, and these things cannot be guaranteed if they have to move every few years.

In many cases, migrants also establish new structures in their lives and find new communities. The children of migrants grow up in this European environment and are more likely to integrate themselves. Usually, after several years in Europe, the children of asylum seekers get the right to

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apply for European citizenship. Thus, even though the wars in Syria and other conflict regions might end in the future, migrants will not be willing to return to their original lands.

Conclusion

The paper started with a short overview of over 100 years of migration studies years by emphasizing some of the most influential theories in this field. It aimed to answer the question, 'Why do people move?'. Simple explanations and solely economic-oriented approaches do not cover the whole complexity of the topic anymore. Migration in the 21st century is mainly the result of a combination of various factors and reasons. Thus, in the past decades, migration studies have developed a multidisciplinary and transnational perspective.

Next, the article evaluated the outcome of 103 interviews with asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. The research findings indicate that the average age of fleeing persons is relatively young. Moreover, the majority of the interview partners were male and came from (civil) war-affected countries. Despite the claims of right-wing European governments, a significant number of people migrated because of severe danger and not because of economic reasons. These findings confirm previous research results.

Regarding the journey, most of the asylum seekers and refugees arrived by sea. They entered the EU in one of the Mediterranean Sea countries (Greece or Italy). The majority paid smugglers to reach their destination and did have a nuanced relationship with them. Almost 80 percent of the people do not have any intention to migrate back to their country of origin. However, due to the limitations of the work, further research is needed.

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