

# Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat: Mapping and documenting migratory journeys and experiences



## Evidence Briefing

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## POLICY SUGGESTIONS

- **Replace deterrent border control policies with interventions that address the diverse causes of irregular migration:** Our findings challenge the assumption that restrictive measures such as detention, deportation, and anti-smuggling are effective deterrents of irregular migration, and affirm the need to address diverse migratory causes across source, neighbouring, and transit regions. We therefore propose that deterrent policies are replaced by interventions that improve livelihoods and educational opportunities across source, neighbouring, and transit regions.
- **Revise migration and protection categories to reflect the multiple reasons that people are on the move:** Our findings indicate that current protection mechanisms do not reflect (i) the diverse forms of violence and conflict that people seek to escape, (ii) the multiplicity of sites that people flee and (iii) the fragmented and fluid journeys involved. We therefore propose that the categories of 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration are rejected in favour of diversified categories that are based on a deeper appreciation of international refugee and human rights law, and are more reflective of reality.
- **Open safe and legal routes for migration, and improve reception conditions and facilities:** Our findings demonstrate that current Search and Rescue mechanisms do not address the vulnerabilities of those migrating across the central and eastern Mediterranean, and that the relationships between those migrating and those facilitating migration are diverse and often ambiguous. We therefore support calls to open safe and legal routes to the EU and to improve reception conditions and facilities at all arrival points across the EU, to ensure that human rights and international protection obligations are met in full.
- **Improve rights-oriented information campaigns across neighbouring, transit and arrival regions:** Our findings indicate that the level of knowledge about migratory routes differs widely across different arrival sites. Regardless of this, new arrivals have little understanding and information on procedural processes and reception conditions either before or after entering the EU. We therefore propose the development of rights-oriented information campaigns that mobilise social networks in order to offer clear and accurate information on admission and asylum processes across neighbouring, transit and arrival regions.

## Project Overview

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### CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Current policy interventions urgently need assessing in light of unprecedented levels of migration and a catastrophic increase in deaths across the Mediterranean. While refugee and migrant deaths *en route* to the European Union are by no means new, the level and intensity of recent tragedies is unprecedented. Over 3700 people were believed to have drowned in the Mediterranean during 2015.<sup>1</sup> Alongside these tragic developments, increasing levels of migration along the Balkan route have been met by border closures within the EU, with growing tensions exacerbating humanitarian challenges across the wider region. EU Member States have struggled to adopt a unified approach to handling the issue. It is in this context that the European Agenda on Migration, proposed in 2015, needs to be assessed. How effective are the policies associated with this Agenda at addressing contemporary migratory dynamics? To what extent are such policies able to address the humanitarian challenges that the recent 'crisis' involves? And how might policies be developed most effectively in order to address the tensions and tragedies that characterise the current situation?

### PROJECT FOCUS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

*Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* seeks to address these questions by assessing the impact of policy interventions on those that they affect most directly: refugees and migrants themselves. It produces a timely and robust evidence base as grounds for informing policy interventions. The project asks:

- How do refugees and migrants negotiate their journeys? What understanding do they have of current policies? How do they narrate or express their expectations and experiences of movement and arrival?
- How are routes and methods of travel affected by policy developments? What legal and social challenges arise in the context of current policies? In what ways might policy engage migration more effectively?

The project addresses these questions across different geographical sites and through the lens of different migratory routes, and seeks to pay attention to the experiences of diverse groups and individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/5683d0b56.html>

## METHODOLOGY

*Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* undertakes 225 in-depth qualitative interviews with migrants and refugees, in two phases. This briefing paper is based on Phase 1 of research, conducted in late 2015/early 2016, which involves 136 interviews<sup>2</sup> across three island arrival sites: Kos (Greece), Malta, and Sicily (Italy). As arrival points to the EU each of these island sites are diverse, with Sicily relatively established in dealing with new arrivals, with Malta effectively closed as an arrival point for boat arrivals currently, and with Kos experiencing dramatically increased levels of new arrivals over the past year. While there are overlapping migratory dynamics across these three arrival points, each also represents a unique migratory site and is analysed as such to provide a comparative perspective on challenges arising across the Mediterranean region more widely.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ON-GOING RESEARCH

This briefing paper provides an overview of research findings across each of the three sites in Phase 1, and proposes policy suggestions on the basis of the analysis to date. The research findings provide rich insights into migratory journeys and experiences across the three sites, and shed light on policy effects by addressing the knowledge and expectations informing migrant/refugee decision-making. The analysis will be developed in Phase 2 in order both to capture changing migratory dynamics as well as to deepen the understanding of policy effects by exploring their negotiation those migrating in their implementation over time. This briefing will be supplemented by further papers and organised events in November 2016 and again in the spring/summer of 2017.

## GREECE – KOS ISLAND

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### CONTEXT

- The Greek maritime border has been on the receiving end of mixed migratory flows since 2013, mainly due to the closure of the land border with Turkey through the Evros fence. In 2013, 11,447 persons were registered entering the islands, with the number reaching 45,000 in 2014.
- Arrivals peaked in 2015: that summer, Lesbos registered the largest portion of arrivals (445,000) with Kos and Chios having 98,000 arrivals each. In total, 851,316 migrants and refugees entered the EU via Greece in 2015. In particular the number of Syrian arrivals greatly increased in 2014-2015.

- Kos is situated directly opposite Bodrum on the Turkish coast. Geographical proximity is a crucial factor since refugees and migrants are able to cross from Turkey to Greece without the need to be accompanied by smugglers. Departing from the coastline of Turkey, they cross to the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, and Samos in inflatable rafts. The island of Kos has been in the spotlight because of the increase in arrivals and the absence of any organized structure by the municipality to receive the refugees.
- Greece functions as a transit site for the overwhelming majority of arrivals reaching the islands. Absence of reception facilities, infrastructure and preparedness on the Greek side, combined with unwillingness to apply for asylum in Greece or lack of knowledge about the possibility to do so, meant that the majority of refugees sought to continue their journey towards western or northern Europe.

### OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

- The first phase of the research took place on the island of Kos from September-November 2015. Interviews were conducted with new arrivals, prior to their departure for Athens. Most interviewees were planning to continue onwards through the Western Balkans to western and northern Europe, while some were still undecided.
- 84% of arrivals in Greece in 2015 came from the world's top ten refugee producing countries, namely Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea. Our interview sample reflects this.
- There were no official reception facilities on Kos; conditions were very poor with all interviewees having to fend for themselves, use their own resources and rely on minimal assistance provided by the host population or civil society organisations. Many were sleeping outside in parks and on the streets.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Absence of legal means of entry to the EU, especially for asylum seekers, not only pushes people to undertake dangerous crossings but, perhaps more crucially, facilitates rather than combats smuggling. Many interviewees agreed that anti-smuggling operations would be a positive step, but only if in parallel the EU provided legal channels for migration and asylum.

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<sup>2</sup> Initially, 150 interviews were envisaged. This number was adjusted in light of lower arrivals in Malta in 2015.

- In the choice to travel, the route of travel, and the destination, interviewees filtered diverse forms of information. Though presence of friends and/or family influences the choice of destination, the likelihood of an asylum claim being accepted is also crucial. Some knowledge of a country's attitudes towards refugees or migrants was influential as were fears that borders might close/were closing further along the route.
- Despite the large number of NGOs and volunteers on the ground, there was limited presence from international organisations (UNHCR, IOM) and the Greek Asylum Service. Interviewees' primary source of information on registration procedures and onward travel to Athens were fellow travellers, whereas official information by the police, international organisations, or NGOs was virtually non-existent. There was no coordinated process for either the management of the NGOs operating on the ground or for accessing information on asylum in Greece. There is also no asylum processing centre in the islands, forcing people to either reach Athens to apply for asylum or the island of Rhodes.
- Syrians were prioritized on arrival to receive registration papers that would enable them to reach Athens. In contrast, the registrations of sub-Saharan Africans, North Africans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and, to a lesser extent, Afghans, often took longer.
- Social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, but also free communication applications, such as Viber and WhatsApp, have played a unique role in this migration, enabling the instantaneous communication while *en route*, with information being passed rapidly about routes, border controls, reception conditions and asylum processing.

- Malta applied a form of mandatory detention up to 18 months if international protection is rejected. Criticism of this policy is well documented. In December 2015 the government published a new Migration Strategy reducing detention to 9 months.
- Despite the Dublin Convention, UNHCR estimates that since 2002 fewer than 30% of the total boat arrivals remain in Malta. Over 2,800 have been resettled to the United States or other EU Member States, while others chose to leave Malta on their own initiative either irregularly or after obtaining travel documents.

## OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

- Given the uniqueness of the Maltese case in terms of the sample frame, our strategy was to focus initially on 'irregular' boat arrivals to the island within the last 18 months (i.e. since 2014) and then to extend as far back as 10 years.
- The Maltese context illustrates the dynamic nature of migratory routes and the dangers of seeing the 2015 Mediterranean crisis as a homogeneous event across diverse sites.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Research participants felt forced to leave their country of origin even if their intention was not always to reach Europe. Many recounted stories of corruption, violence, and war.
- Smuggling networks are complex and heterogeneous involving organised groups and informal contacts.
- Italy was the intended destination as a transit point to reach other European Member States. Rather than a particular destination, what mattered most was finding peace, security, and the conditions for a better life. The general expectation is that Human Rights will be protected in Europe, however, the majority of participants state that Europe has not met these expectations.
- We found a general lack of awareness of EU policies. Some interviewees indicated an awareness of search and rescue, but did not expect to be rescued. They were also unaware of the extent of deaths in the Mediterranean region prior to embarking.
- Duration in detention seems to have decreased over time, and access to information has improved – however, the majority did not understand the asylum process.
- Some interviewees who have international protection have been stuck in Malta as a result of the Dublin Convention for up to a decade. Rejected asylum seekers are effectively stranded in Malta with return not being an option and access to rights very limited.

## MALTA

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### CONTEXT

- An island of 316,000 square kilometers and population of 423,000, Malta is the most southerly EU Member State. Since 2002, more than 19,000 migrants and refugees have arrived 'irregularly' by boat across the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR 2015).
- In the context of events in 2015, however, the Maltese case is anomalous: according to the UNHCR (2015) 105 refugees and migrants arrived 'irregularly' by boat in Malta in the period up to 21 December.

### CONTEXT

- Italy is a long-standing arrival-point for migration to the EU, and serves both as a state of transit and settlement. Arrival figures have increased during the past few years, with a record of 170,100 in 2014, and 153,842 in 2015. Sicily is the main arrival point in Italy, receiving 71% in total during 2014 and 68% during 2015.
- In 2015, 138,422 of those arriving in Italy left from Libya, 11,142 from Egypt, 2,471 from Turkey, 940 from Greece, and 549 from Tunisia. A total of 12,360 unaccompanied minors arrived in Italy via boat in 2015.
- Italy has pursued a multilateral approach to migration governance since the 1990s. This involves cooperation with Tunisia (1998), Morocco (1998), Algeria (1999), Egypt (2007), as well as operational cooperation with Libya throughout the 2000s. Unrest in Libya in 2011 partially destabilized these relations.
- Highly publicised tragedies of migrant deaths at sea led to the Italian humanitarian-military operation *Mare Nostrum* in 2013, which involved search and rescue (SAR) operations beyond the Italian SAR zone. The EU Frontex Joint Operation Triton replaced *Mare Nostrum* in November 2014.

### OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

- Our research strategy involved an initial focus on arrivals post-*Mare Nostrum*, and was then extended to include arrivals during and pre-*Mare Nostrum*, focused on the years 2013-2014. Most interviewees were housed in formal reception centres of various kinds, with a minority finding themselves in an informal reception situation. Interviewees were between 16 and 43 years old, and included women as well as unaccompanied minors.
- Not all new arrivals stay in Italy, claim asylum and enter the complex reception system. In 2014, more than 42,000 Syrians arrived in Italy, but less than 500 applied for asylum in the country. Similarly, more than 34,000 Eritreans arrived in Italy in 2014, while less than 500 applied for asylum. This is reflected in our interview sample.

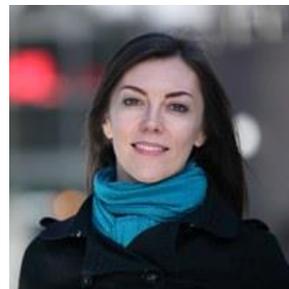
### KEY FINDINGS

- Those who arrive in Italy have left their countries of origin for a variety of reasons. Many point to conflict or persecution as the main cause of migration, with a sizeable minority emphasising personal or familial problems that posed a risk to their safety.

- The majority of interviewees were not informed about European policies and did not have explicit ideas about what to expect. Indeed, only a minority initially intended to come to Italy or Europe, with a significant proportion experiencing more fluid and fragmented journeys in search of peace and work. Several fled specifically conditions in Libya, having initially intended to stay there. Some of those travelling through Libya pointed to the closure of return routes and the violence faced by those seeking to evade the boat crossing. Many had experienced indiscriminate detention for long periods of time by unaccountable authorities, as well as long periods of working without pay.
- Relationships between those migrating and those facilitating migration are highly ambiguous across our sample, with a minority paying fees directly to enter the EU. A significant proportion of our interviewees were forced onto a boat to Italy, while some also reported being helped onto the boat without having any knowledge about where they were going.

## RESEARCH TEAM

### Principal Investigator



**Dr Vicki Squire** (Warwick) is Associate Professor of International Security at the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick. She is author of *The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum* (2009), *The Contested Politics of Mobility* (2011), and

*Post/Humanitarian Border Politics between Mexico and the US: People, Places, Things* (2015). Dr Squire is currently Leverhulme Research Fellow on the project *Human Dignity and Biophysical Violence: Migrant Deaths across the Mediterranean Sea*, as well as PI on *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat*.

### Co-Investigators

**Dr Dallal Stevens** (Warwick) is Associate Professor of Law (Reader) at the University of Warwick. Her expertise is in the fields of refugee and asylum law, on which she has researched and taught for many years. Dallal has written widely on asylum law and policy in the UK, EU and Middle East. Much of her work has revolved around the construction



of the asylum seeker within a contemporary perspective, although she has also examined the plight of the refugee in a historical context. Dallal is regularly asked to undertake media and other public engagements on refugee and asylum issues.



**Dr Nick Vaughan-Williams** (Warwick) is Professor of International Security and Head of the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. In 2015 he was awarded the Philip Leverhulme Prize for outstanding research in Politics and

International Relations. His research, supported with grants from the British Academy, ESRC, and Leverhulme Trust, focuses on the relationship between sovereignty, subjectivity, and the spatial dimensions of security. He has published nine books as author, co-author, or co-editor. His latest single-authored monograph is *Europe's Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond* (2015). His book *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (2009, 2012) was Gold Winner of the Association for Borderlands Studies Book Award.



**Dr Angeliki Dimitriadi** (Athens) is Research Fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and currently a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin. Her research focuses on irregular and transit migration, securitisation of

migration and EU policies on migration and asylum. She was awarded her Ph.D. in Social Administration from Democritus University of Thrace in 2012 with distinction, focusing on irregular transit migration to Greece. She published in academic journals is author of *Transit migration to Greece: the case of Afghans, Bangladeshi and Pakistan migrants*. She is currently working on a book examining the governance of irregular migration at EU external borders.



**Dr Maria Pisani** (Malta) is a Maltese academic, practitioner and activist. She is the co-founder and director of Integra Foundation, Malta. Maria is a lecturer with the Department of Youth and Community Studies, University of Malta. She also coordinates the Centre for Critical

Migration Studies with The Critical Institute. Maria has published extensively in international journals and contributed to edited texts. She is an Editorial Board Member on the *International Journal Disability and the Global South* and the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*. Maria combines this work with her interest in critical pedagogy and engaging praxis as a project of social transformation towards social justice.

## Lead Researcher



**Nina Perkowski** (Warwick) joined Warwick University's Department of Politics and International Studies in November 2015 to work on the Crossing the Mediterranean by Boat project. Meanwhile, she is in the final stages of completing her PhD in

Politics at Edinburgh University. Her research interests revolve around analyses of and reflections on migration governance and the effects of border policies and practices. In her doctoral work, she explores the relationships between humanitarianism, human rights, and security in contemporary EU border governance, with a focus on Frontex. She tweets at @ninaperkowski.

## Researchers

**Saleh Ahmed** (conducting fieldwork in Malta)



**Skerlida Agolli** joined the "Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat" project in September 2015. She carried out the first phase of the project in Greece, in the island of Kos. Previously she worked with the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance as an in-field project manager in

Athens for the project "Irregular Migrant Decision Making in Transit Countries". In her studies, she focused on South Eastern Europe; her research interest revolve around migration governance and migration policies in the region. Currently she works with UNHCR Greece at the Greek-FYROM border.



**Alba Cauchi** is founder and president of the Organisation for Friendship in Diversity. As an operator in the field, Alba has experience in detention, camp and community work. She is involved in lobbying, advocacy and awareness initiatives driven by her passion for equality, diversity,

anti-xenophobia and human rights. She graduated with a Masters in Human Rights from the University of Padova, and has lectured at the University of Malta on matters on inclusion, humanitarian action, and international relations. Alba has contributed to a number of research projects on migration and/or education. She has also been invited to advise and chair external advisory boards for youth NGOs and provide training to civil society groups and transnational networks



**Sarah Mallia** is an arts and culture curator who is passionate about social justice, with a particular interest in refugee and migrant rights. Until recently, she coordinated programmes at PAWA254, an arts and activism hub in Nairobi which encourages civic participation among marginalised communities. Prior to this, she managed psychosocial programmes in detention centres and refugee camps in Malta with the Red Cross. She also co-founded GetUpStandUp!, an organisation promoting cultural diversity, non-discrimination and transcultural dialogue through educational and art programmes. Sarah has an MSc in Migration, Mobility and Development from SOAS, University of London and a BA in Psychology from the University of Malta.

**Dr Emanuela dal Zotto**, Assistant at Università di Pavi