



BETWEEN PROMISE AND PERIL: DIGITALISED MIGRATION IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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In the 21st century, migration is increasingly marked by digital channels of communication. On migration routes bound for Europe, information-sharing via social media has become an irreplaceable pillar of migratory endeavours. In Europe itself, the so-called refugee “crisis” of 2015 has been shaped decisively by the availability of large sets of real-time data, which in turn affected policies and public opinion. Moreover, in the future, digital tools will be increasingly used not only on migration routes but also in the respective policy responses. As a case in point, the European Union (EU)’s 2020 “New Pact on Migration and Asylum” highlights the central role of digitalisation in migration and border management policies. The pivotal role of “IT systems to keep track of arrivals and asylum applicants” is underscored, while the Pact points to the need to ensure interoperability across different sets of systems, especially given the EU’s proclaimed goals of fully digitalised visa procedures by 2025 (EC, 2020).

While digital tools promise myriad opportunities for migrants¹ as well as governments tasked with developing migration policies, there are profound risks emanating from the digitalisation²

¹ The author deliberately uses both terms, “migrants” and “refugees”, While mindful of the legal and political differences, this is done to underscore that the risks emanating from digitalised migration apply to mixed migration flows in their entirety. IOM defines mixed migration as “complex population movements including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants. Unaccompanied minors, environmental migrants, smuggled persons, victims of trafficking and stranded migrants, among others, may also form part of a mixed flow” (IOM, 2018)

² Digitalisation refers to the “use of digital technologies and data as well as interconnection that results in new or changes to existing activities” (OECD, 2019).

of migratory endeavours, which necessitate heightened attention by scholars and policy-makers alike. Questions arise on ways to enhance Euro-Mediterranean³ cooperation and foster innovations in the field of digital migration governance, whilst anticipating associated risks. How does the digital transition shape migration governance in the Euro-Mediterranean region? Which risks and opportunities require special attention? Finding answers to those questions will not only enable policy-makers on both sides of the Mediterranean to take informed action on the challenges inherent to the digital transition. It will also put agency in the hands of those forced to leave their homes and who seek protection by identifying stumbling blocks and inroads for action.

This policy brief will provide an overview on the risk landscape of digitalised migration in the Euro-Mediterranean region, including but not limited to surveillance, misinformation, and the weaponisation of real-time migration data for political ends. To tackle these guiding questions, it will be structured as follows: first, a brief overview of EU external migration governance vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will be provided. Second, a systematic assessment of the risks brought about by digitalisation in the field of migration with a focus on the Euro-Mediterranean space will be conducted. Third, before concluding, the categorised risks of digitalisation in the field of migration in the Euro-Mediterranean region will be translated into actionable policy recommendations directed at European member states and EU institutions.

Externalising responsibility: EU migration governance in the Mediterranean region

Even before forced displacement in Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region dominated the public discourse in the EU in 2015, migration has been a salient issue in relations between Europe and its Southern Neighbourhood. Irregular migration flows via the Canary Islands have brought tens of thousands of people to European shores since the start of the 1990s (MacGregor, 2019). Since the onset of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, increasing numbers of people have arrived at Europe's borders (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). This development accelerated in 2015, when large quantities of people were forcibly displaced, first and foremost from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, leading to more than one million arrivals in Europe that same year (Norman, 2021).

In the past decade, cooperation in the field of migration in the Euro-Mediterranean region has been marked by a double phenomenon: a fortification (ECCHR, 2022) of the EU's external borders and an externalisation⁴ of European migration governance, centred around the objective of "keeping refugees at bay" (Amnesty International, 2015). Especially against the backdrop of growing anti-immigrant sentiments across the EU, policy responses have been increasingly restrictive. As a result, a "new grand compromise" today shapes Euro-Mediterranean relations, "whereby Middle Eastern states capitalised on the European fears raised during the 2015 refugee 'crisis'" (Norman, 2021). Both processes place the control of and – from a European perspective – responsibility for the wellbeing of migrants largely into the hands of Europe's neighbours. Scholars have argued that Middle Eastern states are by no means passive recipients of mixed migration flows, but indeed "strategic actors" that "carefully select the policy most suitable to their domestic and foreign policy agenda" (Norman, 2021). Therefore, a careful assessment of the risks faced by migrants and the connected challenges for external European migration governance is required.

³ The Euro-Mediterranean region encompasses countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

⁴ Externalisation refers to a process in which the management of European borders and migration routes towards it are outsourced to host and transit countries surrounding the EU (Kipp & Koch, 2018).

Four risk dimensions on the digitalisation-migration nexus

The process of digitalisation is rife with promises for migrants and governments alike. On the one hand, refugees and migrants in remote locations are able to gather real-time information on specific routes, making use of information that is readily available on social media platforms. Risks can be averted, prices compared, and experiences exchanged, altogether enhancing human security en route. In the same vein, humanitarian organisations are putting digital tools to work. In a 2017 White Paper, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) highlighted the potential of social media informing the humanitarian response in crisis contexts (UNHCR, 2017). For example, in Egypt the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched the “Bosla” platform in 2017, a digital platform aimed at “fast, easy and most effective access to information” for migrants in North Africa (IOM, 2017).

While humanitarian organisations and migrants themselves are adapting to the digital transformation, governments are also making inroads. EU member states have multiple tools at their disposal to monitor, analyse and manage migration flows. A 2020 study by the European Migration Network showed that 12 out of 22 surveyed governments use forecast methods based on open-source data in the field of migration (Tjaden et al., 2021). At the level of both the EU and United Nations (UN), there have been numerous calls to utilise “big data analytics to track migration flows,” explicitly for policy purposes (Taylor & Meissner, 2019). Satellite data, phone records and GPS-based movement data enable not only commercial firms but also governments to gather, process and analyse large swaths of data. Researchers, too, have used Facebook data to monitor stocks of migrants in host countries (Zagheni et al., 2017). Furthermore, “nowcasting”, i.e., processing and analysis of data, renders possible the generation of real-time assessments on current migration flows (Taylor & Meissner, 2019). However, while some experts have highlighted the promise of big data by rendering more precise predictions of migration flows (Rango, 2015), others call these same hopes “overblown” (Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2018).

While promises of digital technologies in migration abound, more attention on the perils of digitalised migration is necessary. With virtually every migrant equipped with digital tools throughout their migratory endeavours (MacGregor, 2018), an excessively optimistic view on the opportunities of digitalised migration would be too short-sighted. Based on the considerations above, a set of risk factors can be set out, which could form the basis for the generation of EU policy responses. The risks of digitalisation in the field of migration can be grouped into four dimensions: internal population control and abuse by non-state actors within countries in Europe’s Southern Neighbourhood, as well as, externally, flow control and the diplomatic weaponisation of migration.

1. Internally, host countries in the Southern Mediterranean may target domestic migrant communities to exert control by various digital means, including but not limited to surveillance. In recent years, countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region have expanded surveillance capacities and become a “breeding ground for invasive surveillance” (Access Now, 2020; Wagner, 2012). In essence, digitalisation of migratory endeavours creates leeway for increased surveillance of migrant communities, keeping tabs on their every activity (Eide, 2020; MacGregor, 2018; Michaelsen & Glasius 2018).
2. At the same time, non-state actors have entered the fold in countries like Libya and along migration routes in the MENA region. By extortion through digital cash transfers from the country of origin, they exploit migrants’ vulnerabilities. In its new Pact on Migration and Asylum, the EU refers to this phenomenon as “digital smuggling”, which is defined as the “use, in particular by organised criminal groups, of modern information and communication technology to facilitate migrant smuggling, including advertising, organising, collecting payments” (EC, 2020). What is more, abuse by

non-state actors also pertains to misinformation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media campaigns in the MENA region have highlighted that “misinformation about the virus makes refugees even more vulnerable” by exposing them to prejudice and rumours on social media (Schon, 2020). Thus, while governments in the Euro-Mediterranean region have increased opportunities to track and control migrant communities in host and transit countries, non-state groups and the broader citizenry use digital tools to exploit migrants’ vulnerable situations.

3. Externally, these states use different means of control to monitor migration flows at their borders, with vast associated risks for migrants’ safety. Digital movement data, readily available to governments, can be traced in anticipation of disembarkations – a process marked by substantial risks for migrants. Especially in fragile contexts like Libya, the aggressive conduct of the coast guard has been at the centre of criticism of international rights groups, highlighting that the already perilous disembarkation from the Southern Mediterranean shores is exacerbated by Libyan security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This trend is reinforced by the two intertwined developments of a fortification and externalisation of Europe’s migration governance, in which it defers tools and control for migration flows into the hands of third states along migration routes (Privacy International, 2020).
4. On a political level, given the availability of real-time migration data, (authoritarian) states in the Euro-Mediterranean region can “weaponise” migration. In essence, migrants are used as bargaining chips in diplomatic rows. Most recently this was seen in the case of Morocco, when Rabat leveraged its control over outbound migratory flows to extract concessions from Europe on the Western Sahara (Torreblanca, 2021). Without the availability of real-time data and concerted digital information campaigns, these levers would be far less effective.

Summarily, this brief outline of the factors above is a mere first attempt to systematically assess the risks that arise from digitalisation in migration, with a special focus on the Euro-Mediterranean space. Internal factors present migrants with severe risk of surveillance, misinformation and exploitation, while states in the Euro-Mediterranean region can use their respective migrant communities as leverage vis-à-vis Europe, which, as presented in the preceding section, aims to keep migrants at bay.

From risk to response: inroads for EU migration governance

To weather the challenges brought about by the digital transformation, the EU launched multiple initiatives. In 2020, the EU has advanced regulations including but not limited to the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, which aim to take on major Internet platforms in order to increase transparency and counter misinformation (Bendiek, 2021). With its Digital Decade, the EU furthermore established a set of digital goals to be achieved by 2030 (Franke, 2021). With stricter export controls on dual-use technologies, the EU aims “to better respond to emerging threats in an increasingly volatile world,” as the EU Trade Commissioner put it (EC, 2021). Moreover, with its new Pact on Migration and Asylum, the EU addresses some dimensions of the digitalisation-migration nexus, as mentioned above.

Yet, as the assessment of the digitalisation-migration above demonstrated, major challenges remain. While Digital Services and Markets Acts are labelled as “milestones” and a “regulatory crackdown” by some (Goujard & Stolton, 2021) due to their potential to curb disinformation and strengthen the role of governments vis-à-vis powerful tech companies, deficiencies in the EU’s technological portfolio persist (Pfeiffer & Carr, 2021). Surveillance tool purchases in

Europe's Southern Neighbourhood also persist from within the region, disinformation and hate speech on social media platforms are rampant, and digital smuggling continues unabated. After having identified a broad categorisation of current risks on the nexus of digitalisation and migration above, the need to move from risk assessment to response has become apparent. From the four risk categories identified above, four fields of political action can be deduced, which can be a vantage point for further considerations.

With regards to the internal risks of intrusive *population control* and *abuse by non-state actors*, some concrete inroads can be made. With regards to the former, the EU Commission could invest in information tools for migrants and support existing IOM programmes which ensure impartial, anonymous and effective information access for refugees and migrants in countries of host and transit in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Ultimately, initiatives like these should also pay ample attention to migrants' digital literacy by investing in information campaigns on safe communication and the benefits of encrypted communication en route. With regards to digital smuggling, the Commission should explore options to increase cooperation with corporate actors in the mobile money transfer domain. Options could be identified, which would allow rewires of migrants' funds lost to kidnappings in close cooperation with mobile money providers. This initiative would aim at covering the losses of both migrants and their families to save these survivors of exploitative situation from further harm.

As to external risk factors of *flow control* and the diplomatic *weaponisation of migration*, the EU already has a tool at its disposal that it could put to good use: a strong EU stance on maritime safety, especially on search and rescue (SAR) missions is a necessary element to reduce the risks connected to the violent apprehension of migrants. A core precondition would be a decriminalisation of irregular departures. This would contribute to averting unlawful incarcerations after maritime apprehensions, which oftentimes include the collection of ransoms from migrants' families – first and foremost via mobile money transfer providers (MSF, 2019). In the face of mounting attempts by European neighbours to weaponise migrants for political ends, at the end of the day, a unified EU asylum system is key. Until today, incoherent internal migration approaches are the core reason why migrants can be used as bargaining chips in the first place.

While creative thematic policy options are vital to address the significant challenges outlined above, it is just as crucial to identify the right forum to foster a continued dialogue on the matter. A possible format to advance these preliminary ideas within the concert of the EU's external migration policy can be found in the bi-annual High-Level Implementation Forum of top coordinators from member states, and the EU institutions. It is here where the risks of digitalised migration can be effectively addressed in a forum destined to monitor and support the implementation of the EU information systems, as laid out in the 2020 Pact on Migration and Asylum (EC, 2020).

Conclusion

Digitalisation leaves its mark on all domains of society and politics; migration is no exception. Scholars have observed that we can presently see a “datafication of migration statistics where our ‘perception of reality ... becomes more technologically and statistically mediated’” (Taylor & Meissner, 2019). Innovations in data collection and processing inherently “reconfigure how human mobility and migration are known,” with far reaching consequences for governmental action in this domain (Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2018).

As policy-makers, practitioners and scholars explore the opportunities of digitalisation in the field of migration, a closer look at the risks emerging from this development is the order of

the day. And challenges abound. If humanitarian actors and benevolent governments are able to gather large volumes of migration data, forecast migration flows and adapt their responses accordingly, so are authoritarian actors and non-state groups who may aim at leveraging this data and connected vulnerabilities to their advantage. Developing responses will be a crucial ongoing task, not least as both migrants and governments are quick to adapt to changes in the field. While strategic foresight has been identified by many as a systemic weakness in external EU migration policy, proactive policy approaches are needed to mitigate potential risks for migrants' safety. Hence, the aim of this policy brief was to raise attention to and develop a preliminary framework of risk assessment on the digitalisation-migration nexus. The EU is in need of a structured dialogue, both within the Union and with the partners in its Southern Neighbourhood to pre-empt the risks outlined above for the benefit of all.

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