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PLATFORMIZATION OF THE INDUSTRY OF HUMAN SMUGGLING

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Introduction

In recent years, Europe has hardened its border practices to the extent that it has become increasingly difficult to enter Europe and request asylum through legal avenues. In this situation migrants and asylum seekers entering Europe increasingly rely on information about alternative routes and smuggling services shared on various social media platforms. Our paper explores the emergence of *the industry of human smuggling* that operates on social media platforms. Based on interviews with migrants and refugees in Finland, we describe both the platforms for exchanging information and their logics and the concerns raised on them and about them.

While previous research has focused on connectivity and securitization of mobility, we focus on the digital markets that are connected to mobility and migration, mainly around smuggling and trafficking. This area of research is often discussed with the prefix 'dark', connected to issues of illegality, crisis, conflicts and death such as in dark tourism to sites of death or catastrophe (Stone 2013), or as in dark web, a digital platform of criminal activities (Gehl 2018). The aim of our research is not to demonize smuggling (Augustova et al. 2023) but rather to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complications of digital markets around mobility for the people concerned, and most importantly offer insight into the ways in which platform economy shapes migrant mobility and safety of migrants.

Method and data

Our research is based on interviews, diaries, workshops, documents, case observations, social media sites and digital marketplaces shared by migrants and refugees who participated in the study. With a combination participatory research and virtual ethnography (Hine 2015) we map digital sites of smuggling and explore the ways

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in which the research participants, in their highly precarious situation, engaged with smuggling and dealt with the challenges they faced. Our research focuses on how digital markets of smuggling operate in the context of platform economy and who benefits from it in the end. We explore the 'travel agencies', route guides, advertisements, documents and the digital architecture of information flows. As argued by Borkert et al (2018) for internationally displaced persons, migrating into Europe is associated with severe risks that may lead to financial ruin, loss of family, injury and even death. We acknowledge that researching people in such a vulnerable situation requires a particular attention to ethical guidelines throughout the research and commitment to the principles of confidentiality and doing no harm (Black, 2003).

Analysis and findings

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp have become important marketplaces for human traffickers and smugglers (Gopalan 2023; Raets and Janssens 2021). In the context of human smuggling, successful routes and activities are marketed openly on social media, particularly on TikTok. The platformed smuggling industry follows the logics of digital markets, such as AirBnB or Tripadvisor in the sense that migrants who have used smuggling routes or services are guided to give feedback within the platforms (Campana and Gelsthorpe 2021). Often this requires forced visibility and participation on travel videos shared by the smugglers. For the smugglers, online-based feedback, reviews and experience-sharing are an important part of crafting professional image as reliable. However, from the point of view of a migrant or refugee using the routes, trust is not only related to platforms, technology or a professional, industry-like way of operating, but also to social networks and the structures of belonging that influence them. Furthermore the trust is constantly uncertain and requires forced visibility on platforms in ways that deepen vulnerability in a highly precarious life situation.

The research shows the significance of the role of migrants' and refugees' affective (forced) digital labor in sharing experiences and rating services on these platforms. However, at the same time the social network of peers enables filtering safe and trustworthy services from those that are dangerous, overpriced and predatory. Thus sharing experiences with others has become central in tackling misinformation and reducing risks.

Overall the research shows how the industry of human smuggling operates increasingly on social media and follows the logics of platformization (Helmond 2015; Van Dijck et al 2018). It is (informal and irregular) work that is facilitated by platform infrastructure, organized via online but requires spatial proximity and temporal synchronicity (Kluzik 2022) and relies on the affective, forced digital labor of people in precarious life situations. While platforms benefit from the traffic on these sites they may claim ignorance of the risks and illegal nature of the markets - and at the same time render all parties involved prone to data surveillance and control.

The rise of such industry without regulation or safety can be seen highly problematic in making profit on people in precarious and often desperate situations as well as offering space for potentially risky and predatory entrepreneurship. However, at the same time the transition of smuggling markets to social media platforms can also be considered at

some level, to increase the safety of migrants and refugees due to information, evaluations, reviews and recommendations shared among peers. The implications of the platformization of the smuggling industry are complex and echo the ambivalent consequences of platform economy at large. Markets that are born under crisis and in deeply unequal circumstances, when merging with inequalities of platform economy, are not likely to turn fair and safe - yet some unexpected beneficial consequences may arise in these emergent contexts. The paper further discusses the social and political implications of the platformization of migration mobility and the role and responsibility of EU policy in the advent of it.

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