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EU response to the Mediterranean refugee crisis is “likely to fail” say researchers

Policies implemented by European states are ‘likely to fail’ due to an obsession with border controls and so-called ‘pull factors’, new research shows today.

Initial findings from the MEDMIG project - which is run by Coventry University in collaboration with the Universities of Birmingham and Oxford and partners in Greece, Italy, Turkey and Malta – show that current policy responses to the crisis are likely to fail because they do not take adequate account of the critical differences in the experiences, journeys and aspirations of those crossing the Mediterranean. There is a need for nuanced, tailored and targeted policy responses which reflect these diverse, stratified and increasingly complex flows.

The researchers interviewed 500 refugees and migrants who had used, or were planning to use, the central and eastern Mediterranean routes to enter the EU and more than 100 stakeholders .

“Refugees and migrants who travel across the Mediterranean into Europe are not a homogeneous group,” said Professor Heaven Crawley from Coventry University’s Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR). “There are many fundamentally different groups of people on the move, and they are moving for very different reasons. To imagine that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to discouraging migration through punitive measures will work is naïve, at best. More worryingly, it is pushing people into ever riskier routes into and within the EU.”

The early findings of the research – which have been published as a research brief and were shared with policy makers, international organisations and NGOs at a roundtable held in Oxford last week - also raise significant questions about the impact of patrolling and rescue practices on migrant death rates at sea.

Dr Nando Sigona, from the University of Birmingham’s Institute for Research into Superdiversity, said: “Death rates vary considerably between the Aegean and the Central Mediterranean routes. One person died for every 53 safe arrivals in Italy, while for Greece it was one death for every 1049 arrivals in 2015 - far safer than the Central Mediterranean”.

Geographic distance and sea conditions are key factors in the death rates, but not the only ones. Dr Sigona added: “Recently there has been a significant increase in the death rate in the Aegean - up to 1 in 409 arrivals. This points to a change in discourse, policy and practice of patrolling and rescue by EU authorities, which has made the situation more dangerous”.

The research also challenges simplistic depictions of the people who facilitate the movement of people from Turkey and Libya into Europe as 'ruthless smugglers' who routinely endanger the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. Deterrence policies without access to protection, resettlement or humanitarian assistance will simply drive demand for the services of smugglers who can facilitate access.

Dr Franck Duvell, from Oxford University's Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) said: "There is a demand driven process at work. These 'smugglers' are providing a service that people are desperate for because there are no regulated and safe routes that they are allowed to take to reach the EU and claim asylum.

"In Turkey, many of these people are Syrians themselves, and have a sense of responsibility to those people they are moving – they tend to be paid only when people have arrived safely. This is not true in Libya, though, where smugglers are paid upfront and have less concern for safety. In reality more than 99% of those crossing the Mediterranean have reached the EU safely, so despite the horrific death-toll, few will be discouraged from making the trip because of the risks."

The report found that many of those on the move had been displaced for long periods of time, a point which has an important bearing on how migration flows will evolve over time.

Professor Crawley added: "Refugees and migrants have often been on the move for long periods. They have fled conflict, persecution, poverty or other factors that make it impossible for them to remain at home, but they are also looking to build a life, rather than simply to escape. Months, or even years, in limbo without secure legal status, access to the labour market or education and basic healthcare for their children is often what has driven them to try to find a new life in Europe."

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To find out more about MEDMIG and to access the research brief visit
www.medmig.info

Notes for editors:

- The MEDMIG project is led by the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University, in collaboration with the University of Birmingham (UK), the University of Oxford (UK), ELIAMEP (Greece), FIERI (Italy), People for Change Foundation (Malta) and Yasar University (Turkey).
- The project is part of the 'Mediterranean Migration Research Programme' which has been established through the [Economic and Social Research Council's \(ESRC\)](#) £1 million 'Urgency Grant' and is co-funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DfID). Findings will be used to inform the development of policy and responses by governments, European agencies, and charities. More at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/news/news-items/1-million-urgency-grant-to-fund-social-science-research-into-migration-crisis/>
- Professor Heaven Crawley will discuss the emerging findings of the MEDMIG project at RGS-IBG (the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers) on 22nd March as part of the '21st Century Challenges: Policy Forum' discussions. More at: <http://21stcenturychallenges.org/2016/01/28/europes-migration-crisis/>