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THE GAME



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THE GAME

**International Aid Network IAN
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Summary

Since 2015, when migration through so called ‘Balkan route’ was on its peak, a significant number of migrants is getting stranded in transit countries. As those countries are not their desired destination, a large number of migrants, including unaccompanied minors among them, continuously try to proceed forward and they go to the ‘game’ (a colloquial name for an illegal attempt to cross the border). The ‘game’, in the most cases, ends in violence and torture.

International Aid Network IAN within its project ‘Holistic Action against Torture’, funded by The European Union through European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), conducted a qualitative research with the aim to understand psychological mechanisms, social, economic and other factors that influence recurrent going to the ‘game’ despite the consequences like torture and other traumatic experiences.

The data are collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. A total of 45 respondents participated in this research. The majority of the sample are men, under the age of 18, and most of them are from Afghanistan.

According to our findings, the ‘game’ is a journey with well-defined steps and elements. The following elements stand out: motivation, negotiations, anticipation, the ‘game’, the outcome of the ‘game’.

Those who go to the ‘game’ are heroes who answer their call to serve their family and try to achieve a better future for everyone. It is about moving from instability, war, stress, racism, family/tribal disputes and vendetta, towards stability, peace, calmness, tolerance, security. Often such idealistic perception of final destination is driven by other family members who are lawful citizens across the Europe. The goal is to get to the final destination and ‘game’ is just a tool to achieve that.

For migrants who are currently staying in Serbia, the most difficult thing is that they are in some kind of a loop from which they cannot get out, they cannot go forward and they cannot go back, as if they are trapped where they are. When they talk about the 'game' - it's like talking about escaping from prison, which brings excitement but, at the same time, also disappointment when they are caught and brought back.

Understanding motivation, feelings, and all other internal and external factors that influence the behaviour of those who go on the 'game' can help all those who provide services to migrants/asylum seekers to better understand the integration problems faced by this group of people, and which are the result of these processes, and to align their services with the needs of these people.



Introduction

International Aid Network IAN is a local, non-governmental organization dedicated to providing assistance and advocating for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. Within IAN, Centre for rehabilitation of torture victims has been operating since 2000, where survivors of torture and inhumane treatment can receive comprehensive rehabilitation.

Although since 1987, under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, torture has been absolutely prohibited and must not occur under any circumstances or excuses, it has happened and continues to happen today.

Torture is an act of extreme violence, the deliberate infliction of severe physical or mental suffering or pain, with the aim of extracting a confession from a person, breaking his/her personality, punishing him/her, intimidating the community, and being committed by an official or with his/her consent or order.

Torture is one of the most terrible violations of human rights, it is a crime against humanity and the dignity of the person, whose goal is to destroy human foundations, his/her basic security and is directed against society as a whole.

Torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment most often occur in wars (war camps),

but also occur in peacetime, most often in prisons, detention centres and other closed institutions - psychiatric hospitals, social welfare institutions - homes for people with disabilities, for the elderly, in refugee camps, reception centres, asylum centres, etc.

As an extreme, interpersonal trauma, torture leaves scars on the victim's psychological and physical health and dignity, on his/her family and friends, but also on society as a whole. Problems occur at different levels - existential, social, psychological, legal and medical.

Nowadays, torture takes place at the borders, where refugees and migrants are looking for a way to reach a better life, trying to cross the border illegally, going to the so-called 'game'. The term 'game' is a colloquial name for an illegal attempt to cross the border.

The topic of the research, the results of which will be presented in this publication, are psychological mechanisms, social, economic and other factors that influence decision to go on the 'game', and to keep going again, regardless of the consequences it brings, such as torture and many other traumatic experiences.

Research 'The Game' is a part of the activities within the regional project 'Holistic Action against Torture', which has been implemented from January 2018 to April 2021, and is funded by the European Union through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. The aim of the project is to contribute to the prevention of torture, punishment of perpetrators and healing the consequences of torture in the Balkans. The project is implemented by International Aid Network IAN in partnership with Center for Civic Initiative from Prilep (North Macedonia) and Centre for Human Rights from Nis.

NUMBER OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND OTHER MIGRANTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Since 2008 and the establishment of the national asylum system, until 31 December 2020, the Asylum Office has approved the asylum application of 194 foreigners, i.e. it has approved 90 refugee status and granted 104 subsidiary protections.

A total of 2.830 people expressed the intention to seek asylum, i.e. were registered in accordance with the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (LATP) from 1 January to 31 December 2020. Their number was substantially lower than in the same period in 2019, when 12.937 people expressed the intention to seek asylum in Serbia. The drastic difference was not due only to a lower inflow of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, but to the fact that the MOI's registration activities were scaled down due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Only 220 asylum intentions were registered during the state of emergency, specifically from early March to end May (149 in March, none in April and 71 in May), while the UNHCR registered 1,829 newly-arrived migrants in the same period.

Although slightly over 20,000 asylum seekers and migrants entered the country, a relatively small number of them sought international protection in Serbia, as the following data illustrate. Of all foreigners who expressed the intention to apply for asylum in Serbia by end December 2020, majority were men (2,649), mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and Bangladesh. A total of 144 people applied for asylum which is almost twice less than in the previous year (252), and they come from Iran, Syria, Burundi, Ghana, Iraq, Turkey, Libya and Northern Macedonia. Of the 29 upheld applications, the Asylum Office granted refuge in 17 cases and subsidiary protection in 12 cases.

Looking at the age structure, the intention to seek asylum was expressed by 638 minors, of whom 71 were unaccompanied. Most of the 71 unaccompanied children were nationals of Afghanistan (48) and Pakistan (7). (Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2020, Belgrade Centre for Human rights)

During the first two months of 2021, the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) noted 5,453 newly registered persons. The top three nationalities of new arrivals were Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia, while most of them transited through North Macedonia. In mid-March, 6,129 migrants were recorded present in the Republic of Serbia, of which 1,314 resided outside the centres. (azil.rs)

ATTEMPTS TO CROSS THE BORDER

The largest number of migrants currently residing in the Republic of Serbia, both registered and unregistered, want to go to Western European countries. That journey is not easy, and it is usually uncertain, difficult, dangerous and illegal. Most migrants try to reach the countries of the European Union with the help of smugglers, and often, it depends on the amount of money, whether they will reach the desired destination or not.

At the peak of the European refugee crisis in 2015, 'the game' consisted of providing information, guidance and navigation that was often unnecessary as the route was 'open', however smugglers offered their services to those seeking to reach an EU destination, misusing their lack of information, insecurity and vulnerability. At that time 'the game' was quick, more easy and significantly cheaper than it is today. As the route closed in March 2016 and crossing the borders became very hard, the journey slowed down and 'the game' became a prolonged pro-

cess often involving years of living, working and moving invisibly. (Game people, Irregular migration and risks, CRPC 2019.) In that process, life is often reduced to mere survival.

Attempts to cross the borders from the Republic of Serbia to neighbouring countries, are usually organized with smugglers. Nevertheless, as evidenced by many reports from international and domestic organisations, migrants are mostly caught by the border police of neighbouring countries, they are often victims of physical and psychological violence by the same actors and returned to Serbia.

Humanitarian Center for Integration and Tolerance (HCIT) registered several dozens of cases of collective expulsions from Hungary, Romania and Croatia involving a total of 964 refugees and migrants in May and June 2017. The majority of them were expelled from Croatia (601). The majority of collectively expelled foreigners were the nationals of Afghanistan (more than 440) and Pakistan (more than 320). Of special concern is the fact that 101 child (89 unaccompanied minors) and 14 women were among the total number of expelled persons.

In April 2017, the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights and International Aid Network (IAN) decided to form a special team of lawyers, psychologists and forensic experts to document cases of abuse of refugees and migrants in the neighbouring countries in line with the Istanbul Protocol. The information was collected in May and June 2017. 19 cases of abuse have been documented and published, mostly from Croatia, but also from Hungary and Romania. Abuse included beating with rubber batons and fists, slapping, kicking, dog bites, use of tear gas, use of rubber bullets, insults, humiliation and intimidation. (Documenting Abuse and Collective Expulsions of Refugees and Migrants, BCHR and IAN, 2017)

The described practice of border authorities and similar experiences of migrants are not limited to the mentioned period in which the documenting was conducted. Migrants who try to illegally cross the borders are exposed to such and similar, often much worse experiences with each repeated attempt. Recent reports point to similar practices, such as the Danish Refugee Council's (DRC) report, which covers the period October 2020 and speaks of the brutal treatment of migrants by the Croatian police on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Nevertheless, most of them try the same thing again, and in a short period of time they are able to experience the same thing even several dozen times. The goal of torture at the borders, as well as mostly any systemic abuse, is to intimidate a certain community, in this case the migrant population, in order to stop them in trying to cross the border illegally. These young people do not seem to be intimidated enough regardless of the bad experience they have or are so desperate that regardless of that experience of violence, they see the 'game' as the only way out of their own terrible situation in which they find themselves. Among the migrants who are trying to reach Western Europe in this way, there is a large number of unaccompanied minors. Due to their vulnerability, unaccompanied children and youth are a particularly risky category in such circumstances. Often these are children or adolescents who are already burdened by some traumatic experiences from the country of origin and who are exposed to various traumatic situations and experiences along the way.

The findings we gained in May and June 2017 and the fact that despite the torture they experience at the borders, migrants continue to try to cross them in the same way, led us to conduct new research in order to understand the factors (psychological mechanisms, social pressures, economic pressures, etc.) that

affect or lie beneath repetitive behaviour, the constant re-attempt to go to the 'game' regardless of the failure, trauma, and torture that the 'game' carries.

Research methodology

The aim of the research is to understand the factors (psychological, economic, social, etc.) that influence going to the 'game'.

Qualitative research was done. Data were collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The questions that were the basis for the data collection were created for the purposes of this research. 4 focus groups and 5 interviews were conducted.

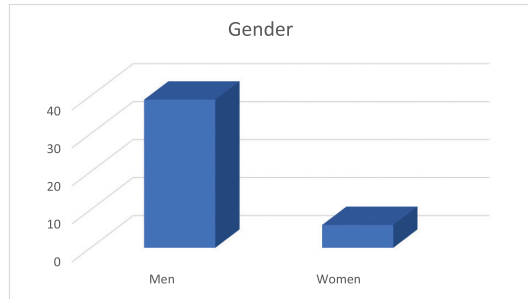
The research was conducted in the period from January 1, 2019 to April 30, 2021.

The respondents in the research were asylum seekers and migrants accommodated in asylum centers in Bogovađa, Banja Koviljača, as well as in the home for unaccompanied minor migrants in Loznica.

Sample

The research included 45 respondents.

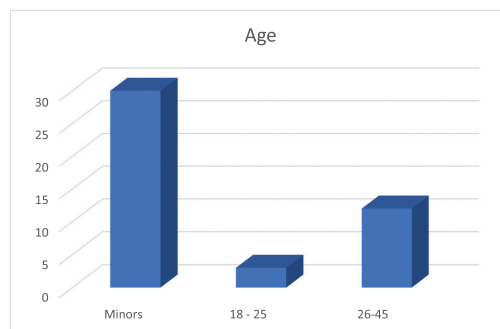
Total number of respondents was 45, and out of that number 87% (39) were men and 13% (6) were women.



Graph 1. Gender distribution

Age

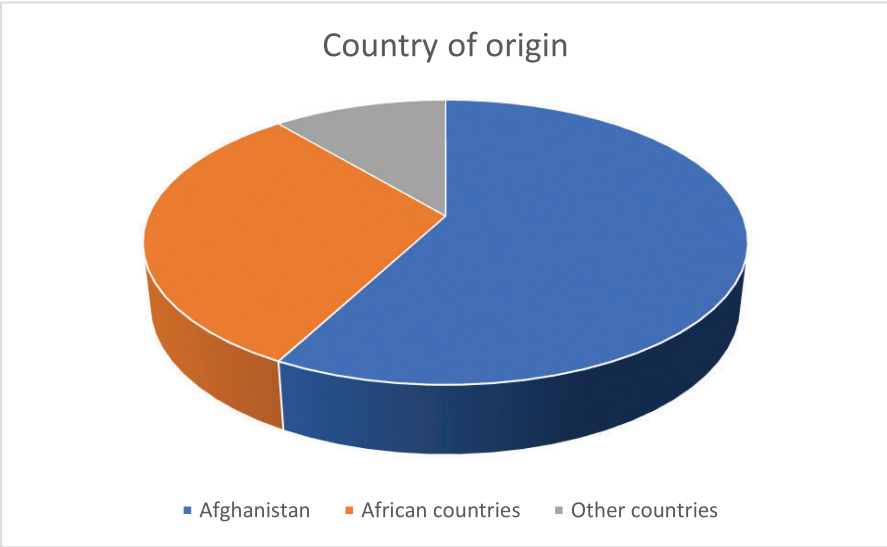
The respondents in the research were young people, with 21 years as average age. The youngest respondent was 11 years old and the oldest 44. The majority of respondents in the sample were minors 67% (30), then persons between 25 and 45 years of age 26% (12), and persons aged 18 to 25 years 7% (3) in the sample.



Graph 2. Age distribution

Country of origin

The largest number of respondents in the research is from Afghanistan 58% (26), followed by respondents from African countries such as Burundi, Ghana, Cameroon, etc. which make up 31% (14), and others coming from countries like Iraq, Iran, Syria that makes 11% (5) of the sample.



Graph 3. Country of origin

Qualitative data analysis

According to our findings, 'game' is a journey with well-defined steps and phases. It has a start/initial phase, followed with several steps with rather different outcomes. It all starts with the initial motivation and defining of the 'main objective' of the game. It is usually final destination which migrant should eventually reach. Often it is country from EU/Western Europe where some relatives are already established and are enjoying much needed stability, security, economy independence and freedom. Such 'voices' from abroad are important driver for family to consider sending one of its members abroad. Often it is not much a choice of individual to take this endeavour, but more a matter of duty and sense of responsibility towards family. A chosen family member - migrant should take this journey, and once on the other side, he/she should make some kind of foundation/terrain for other family members to join. This is highly dangerous and risky mission and assumes illegal attempts to cross multiple country borders by using smugglers and guides. Eyes of all family members are pointed at migrant. He/she becomes some sort of a hero, a seeker of better destiny for himself, and for the family. Such pressure is higher if migrant is a male, especially if he is an older son comparing to younger males and/or daughters.

Migrants are heroes who answer their call to serve their families

and try to score a better future for everyone. It is about moving from instability, war, stress, racism, family/tribal disputes and vendetta, towards stability, peace, calmness, tolerance, security. Often such idealistic perception of final destination is driven by other family members who are lawful citizens across the Europe. The goal is to get to the final destination and 'game' is just a tool to achieve that.

Not to take a 'game' is a sign of poor character, cowardice and lack of love and respect for the family.

We tried to deconstruct the whole process and show some insights and risks at every defined phase.

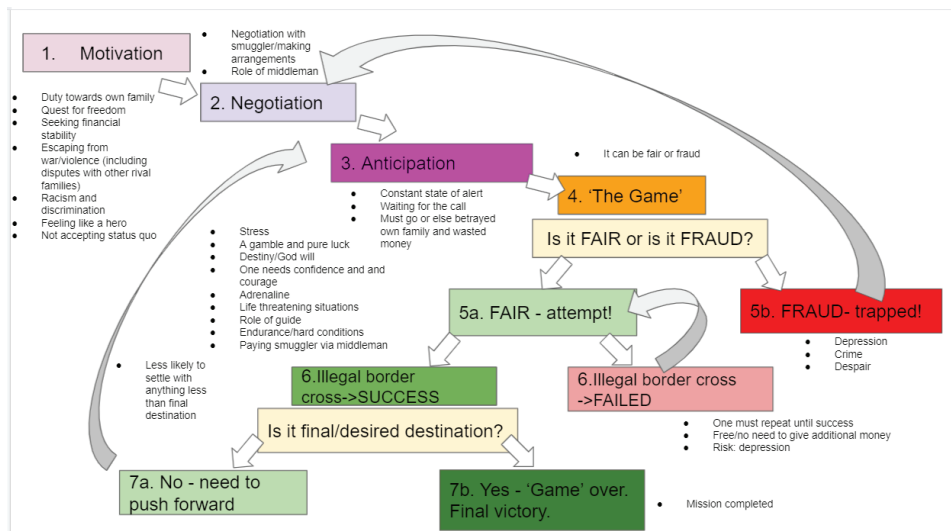


Diagram 1. The elements of 'game'

MOTIVATION

Respondents' responses related to motivation to participate in 'game', as well as for repeated attempts to cross borders, can be grouped into several main motivational factors:

Sense of duty towards family - sacrifice for the greater good
- helping family find better destiny:

I want my brothers and sisters to have a better life. I'm the oldest brother, and I need to solve problems.'

'It's because of my family, family is my motive.'

'Every time the police catch us, they beat us. And we have to go, because we have no other choice. If they break our arms and legs, we have to go again. Because it is an obligation.'

Being a Hero - someone who should win against all odds, it is about being brave and confident:

'When we went through that, we felt like we ... I don't know ... went through some of the worst torments. Basically, like some amazing heroic deed we survived.'

Breaking the status quo:

'In Afghanistan there is a saying 'We will either live decently or we will just be stinky failures until we die'

We made the decision, at the cost of dying. Nothing better awaits us in Afghanistan.'

Hope, a quest for freedom, not trying means not having any hope (connected to the point above):

„My only hope is that I can support my family, enable them to have a normal life and not to live in poverty.'

And if I manage that, I'll be happy, I don't hope for anything else.'

'It is a better life for my children.'

„' Game is a kind of hope that I can get out of here for something better.'

Often motivation to take a game is a slow administrative process of asylum procedure and poor chance of getting asylum legally:

'We are still waiting, although we know that 95% of people will be rejected for asylum. That's why people move on.'

Going to the 'game' is basically a chance to start a new life for oneself and for the entire family.

NEGOTIATIONS

This phase considers reaching out to family contacts in order to find reliable and trustworthy smuggler which will give his financial request/proposal for the family. Price depends on final destination and route (how hard is it for smuggler to organize it). Usually, it is around several thousands of euros per person. There is even a new term 'VIP GAME', much more expensive, but higher chance for success to get to the EU. (Just as in digital games, premium purchase guarantees advantage and higher chance for success).

'If you give that money, then you are 100% in the European Union, that is the most expensive 'game'.

Family savings as well as money coming from family members who are abroad are being invested into this.

Middle man agencies are vital point of this process as they ensure and guarantee that neither side will be tricked.

In an ideal case, the person who goes to the 'game' pays small amount upfront, by using a middle man. After one part of the journey - 'level' is completed (one boarder is illegally crossed), migrant reports this to the middle man and he/she forwards the money to the smuggler. After that, migrant is waiting for another call (another 'game') to cross another border. After arriving to the final destination, smuggler will get all of his money.

'If we succeed, then great, we have passed this country, one level more ...'

ANTICIPATION

Big part of this whole journey is about waiting for the special call. Call coming from smuggler or someone who is directly in contacts with him/her is a signal that migrant should get ready and that it is time for action.

Whenever a smuggler calls and says 'game' is ready, you have to come.'

This waiting time can vary a lot and is accompanied with high stress and expectations. When called upon, one must be ready, or else, family will become aware that their biggest bet and hope has failed. Usually when 'game' is set, this means that action starts in near future – in the next couple of days.

„There is a feeling of joy because we are going towards the goal, but also a feeling of fear because your life hangs by a thread and something bad can happen at any moment.'

‘GAME’

If smuggler is trustworthy and the ‘game’ is fair, migrants will get connected with the local guide who will take them across or will show them the illegal way to cross the border.

Otherwise, it can happen that smuggler just takes the money without rendering any service or guidance in return. Migrants are faced with several huge risks at that point as they are left without any money or plan what to do next. This can lead towards criminal behaviour, despair, depression, abuse of alcohol and drugs in order to reduce stress and sense of despair. If, ‘game’ is ‘fair’ one takes a shot. It is usually highly risky journey with life threatening situations or, at best, just exhausting.

„We had food for two days, the third day we didn’t have food or water, just a little pistachio, which the smuggler gave us.’

“It was very cold, it was raining, I had to sleep outside.’

You go through the forest with wild animals ... If you fall behind, you can’t go back, nor do you know how to go further. You get lost and that’s it. Those animals will eat you or you will starve to death.’

It was very difficult, and if I talk about it, I would surely cry. Many people lost their lives both in the water and in the forest.’

‘Police shot at the wheels and the car overturned.’

‘They cut our pants, above our knees, to freeze, to catch a cold and not to come again. It was cold there, it was snowing, they had a dog ... they hold the dog, beat us and then when they beat us, they said - Run now, go where you came from. And while we are running, when

we are a little further away, they let the dog go. And then a dog bite someone.'

'It was hard for me; I was cold and I cried. It's hard when you're alone and when there's no one to protect you.'

'The ship was sunk. We managed to escape, but my aunt didn't.'

In a nutshell, according to our findings, we can say that 'game' is like a gamble. A lucky shot with low chance for success. Success is not something which migrant is controlling or has any influence on it. It purely depends of external factors, luck and 'God's will'. Successful crossing of the border is a major moral boost and another part of a journey completed - 'one more level' solved. One more step towards bright future and final destination. Failed attempt means beating, torture, depression, stress and sense of shame/failure. One MUST gather additional strength to repeat, no matter the cost.

'Every time we cross the border, we say - Now we've come a little closer, we are closer.'

'If we succeed, then great, we have passed this country, one level higher, one step closer to the goal. And if you don't succeed, then you fall into depression.'

'If we pass, then we are happy. If not, we again hope that we will pass.'

'Self-confidence is also important, self-belief, after 10 failed attempts you say again - the next 'game' I go again and I pass, so you must believe in yourself.'

'I don't think there's anything good in the 'game', the only thing is that you go on, the further you go, the better.'

A HAPPY END?

Once final destination is achieved, mission is accomplished and game ends. Everybody is happy.

However, huge part of migrant population gets trapped in some part of the journey - 'game loop'. Usually, this is not something they consider as a happy end, as quality of life in Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, North Macedonia is not something which they are aspiring to. To push this even further, it is not something they will settle with as well. They will never stop trying to go to the final destination, as after all everything is at stake, whole family investment and future is in their hands. They must not settle with less. Full victory or be a stinky failure until death.



Interpretation and conclusions

Based on this research, which included 45 respondents, we can report some very important conclusions that can help us better understand migrants/asylum seekers/refugees, their behaviour and feelings related to migration and movement itself.

Most of the participants in this research are young men from Afghanistan, and they stand out as a group in their attempts to cross the border, i.e. in going to the 'game'. Respondents who came from African countries, older respondents, those who started own families, even though their families remained in the country of origin, are less inclined to go on a 'game'. They came to Serbia with 'game', but they are more ready to stay longer in Serbia and try to settle here and get some form of protection.

We can say that the term 'game' probably comes from an English word that indicates a digital game, precisely because of the obstacles, the dangers on that journey that need to be overcome in order to move to the next country, or to the next level. The name for that trip was probably given by smugglers, but the migrants who 'live' or practice the 'game' have accepted the name and we can say that 'game' has a much broader meaning in addition to the literal and concrete illegal border crossing. 'Game' is a process that lasts and implies several phases or stages that do not necessarily follow one another chronologi-

cally. 'Game', first of all, has its motivation, the reasons why someone starts a 'game' that can be different. Although we know that war and armed conflict, as well as racism and discrimination, are one of the main drivers of leaving the country of origin, the constant departure to the 'game' is triggered by other factors that have roots in the internal, psychological and personal space. Those who are constantly trying to cross the border, regardless of the risks it carries, and the violence they experience, seem as if they were triggered by the belief that they are guided by some higher goal, and are doing something very important and big for their family. They are the ones who are chosen and who are the heroes, or the saviours of their loved ones. They are additionally motivated to persevere in their endeavour by projecting themselves into one of the countries where they will live a free, stable, peaceful, secure life. In fact, they are victims, and most often they are obliged to go further, because their family asks them to.

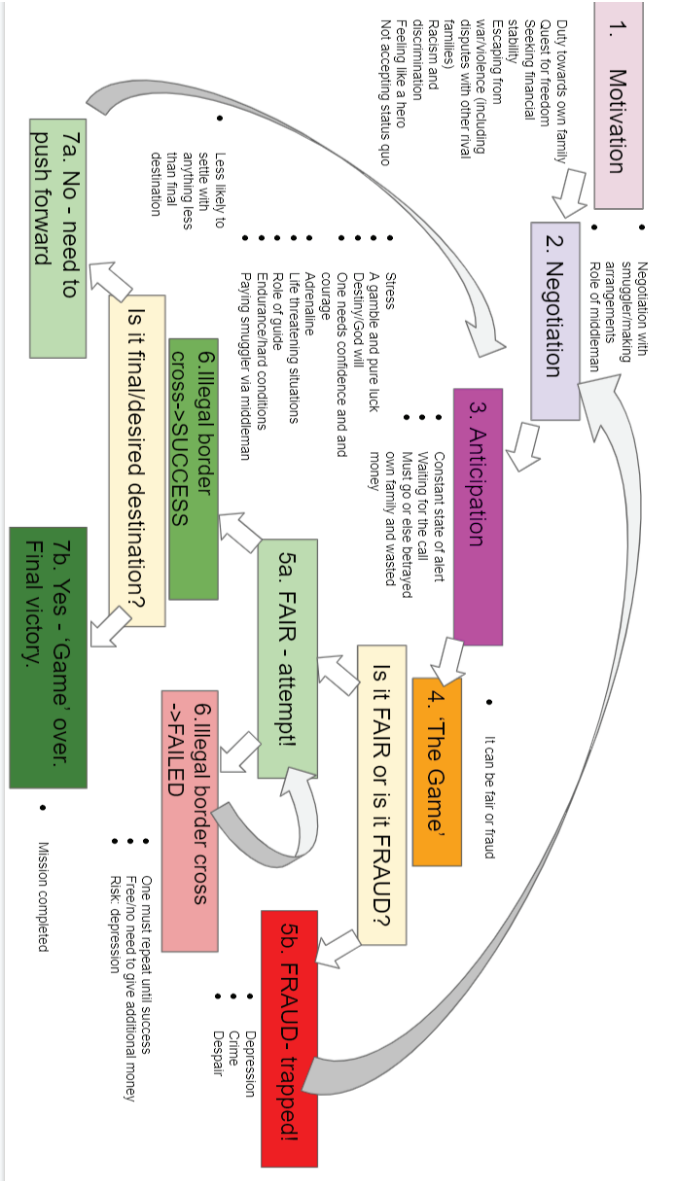
In addition to the motivation to persevere, the 'game' involves the process of negotiating with smugglers, numerous attempts of border crossing that can be successful or unsuccessful, but also a multitude of feelings that accompany all these phases or stages, such as fear, despair, depression, anger, rage, joy, happiness. Perhaps these intense emotions are an additional driver of behaviour, which makes them feel alive and persevere, because everything is better than the 'status quo'. The most difficult thing for them is that they are in some kind of a loop from which they cannot get out, they cannot go forward and they cannot go back, as if they are trapped where they are. When they talk about the 'game' - it's like talking about escaping from prison, which brings at the same time excitement but also disappointment when they are caught and brought back.

Although, in the opinion of our respondents, the very outcome of the 'game' is luck or 'God's will', still a lot of money is at

stake as well. The more you pay the better the outcome will be.

Finally, perhaps the term “journey” by which some of the respondents in this study explain ‘game’ is more appropriate to describe the duration of this process, which is often counted in years. Some grow up in the process, some grow old, and some even lose their lives.

APPENDIX 1: THE ELEMENTS OF 'GAME'



Contents

Summary	5
Introduction	7
Research methodology	15
Qualitative dataanalysis	19
Interpretation and conclusions	27

