

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

I am Matej Skalicki, and this is Czech Radio News Podcast, Vinohradská 12.

People smugglers, who are they, how much do they ask for a trip to Europe, and how to prevent the endless tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea.

Recently, a fishing trawler capsized near the Greek coast, and meanwhile, thousands more migrants are getting ready for treading across the sea.

I spoke to Gianpaolo Muzumacci, an Italian journalist, and the author of a book called Confessions of a People Smuggler.

It's Sunday, July 2nd.

Hi, Gianpaolo, thank you very much for joining us in this podcast.

It's a pleasure.

So, there is an ongoing investigation of what actually happened on June 14th, when a fishing trawler sank near the Greek coast with approximately 750 migrants on board.

Many of them died at night.

Hundreds are still missing to this day.

There is a many way how to follow the case, but let's focus in this interview on how people usually end up on the boat on the way to Europe.

Can you tell me where have this all began?

It's a very hard question, because I would say it's all over the world, because people move, and they move from the southeast of Asia, they move from Afghanistan, they move from now Russia, they move from South America to North America, they move from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Libyan coast, and then maybe eventually to Europe.

So all these trips, all these damner tragedies, they start all over the world.

And this is crazy to see how the migration routes, in a way, they are always the same, and sometimes they change.

Sometimes we can see routes and people coming from Afghanistan with a huge wave, with a huge amount of people, and then maybe for a few months they stop, and they start again.

So all these trips, they start for many reasons, in many, many regions all over the world, because there's a very simple reason we have to underline and understand.

People move and people will keep on moving.

How difficult is to find a smuggler who is this person?

Who are smugglers?

To find a smuggler is very easy.

If you go in specific areas, like I mentioned Afghanistan or some African countries, and you want to move, you probably already know a smuggler.

They don't introduce themselves like, hello, I'm an evils smuggler, I'm a criminal.

They are friends.

They can facilitate your trip, and probably they have already helped some of your friends or relatives or a cousin or a boyfriend.

So it's very, very easy.

If you are in a remote area of Afghanistan, you will find a smuggler very, very easy.

Just spread the voice, because they work on their reputation.

So they want the people to know that they are there, they are ready to work, and they are just waiting for some new clients.

Going back to the second part of the question, so who is a typical smuggler?

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

This is a bit hard, because there's not only one smuggler.
We are talking about a criminal network.
So basically we have many different types of this criminal network.
We have the first actor, which is probably based in your area, in your village.
So if you are from Herat in Afghanistan, the first contact, the first people you get in touch is an Afghan people.
So the first tab of the network is someone very close to you, and necessarily the same ethnic and origin, because you have to speak to someone you trust.
So basically you speak the same language, and probably you have the same faith in terms of, for example, Shia or Sunni.
If you're Muslim, you will find Muslim smugglers, if you're Christian, and so on.
So the fact that you put your life in the hands of someone you can trust is the first step of your trip.
But then you have many, many different smugglers in this network.
Because from Herat in Afghanistan, then you have to pass as many, many borders.
So you will have another man or woman in Pakistan, and then probably in Iran, and then in Turkey, then in Greece, and then in Northern Europe.
And all these people at the high level, they speak each other, and they coordinate of these efforts in order to push you, to bring you up to your destination, the final destination.
But basically it's a bit hard, but let's call them the bosses.
The boss of the smuggling network is probably someone who has already another business, like for example Abazar, a travel agency.
It could be a fisherman with a lot of fishing boats, for example.
I'm thinking about the Turkish coast or the Libyan coast or the Tunisian coast, for example.
So the main point for a smuggler is to have the right job, the official one, in the right place, in the right moment.
If you have a huge fleet of fish boats in Turkey, you are in a very good position to become a very big smuggler.
Because you know the routes, you have the means, you know the sea, so it's perfect for you.
So you're both involved in fishing and human trafficking.
Yes, exactly.
Both legal and illegal activity.
Exactly.
Because the official, the legal activity, it's a very good way to wash the money.
So basically you're reinvesting some other official activities, very clean, very open.
I met many, many smugglers, they do have the double job, let's say.
The people who want to move to Europe negotiate the price.
Because as far as we know, many of them spend all the money they have on the trip to Europe.
Well, I wouldn't say that the rates, the price is fixed, but sometimes you have a minimum amount of money you have to spend, otherwise there's something wrong.
Probably they are going to tell you something which is not real.
I mean, if they tell you, okay, I'm going to move from Kabul to Paris for €2,000 is not something possible on Earth, it's going to be about €10,000 more or less.
It's a matter of market, it's a matter of safety of the journey.

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

The more you spend, the more the journey will be safe.

If I push this consideration to the limit, imagine someone who has a lot of money, an Afghan retired officer who saved some money and he wants to go to London.

Okay, he probably could pay a lot of money to the Taliban in order to have the passport.

And then maybe through some embassy, he could try to get a visa, a regular visa, then move to Islamabad and then take a plane.

So the more money you have, the more you can move and you can find solutions.

Otherwise, it's a matter of step-by-step approaching Europe, approaching Northern America.

That's why sometimes migrants, they stop in their journey for many months.

And they found a black job, for example, in Iran or, for example, in Tunisia or in Libya.

They collect some money and then they pay the rest of the trip.

And when we say, okay, it's going to be about €10,000 or \$10,000 if you want, this is the basic rate because we never consider the fact that many, many migrants are pushing back in some borders.

So you have sometimes to double the rate of this specific trip.

For example, in the Balkans, I see people stuck in Serbia, try to cross the border to Bosnia and Zegovina, and they met people that they try to do it three, four, five times.

And each time is around €300 or less.

So when we say \$10,000, we have also to consider that this amount of money could be even the double.

It depends on how lucky you are, how lucky you are.

For example, let's focus back on the tragedy that happened in mid June near the Greek coast.

Washington Post describes a story of one of the migrants who says that the port city of Tobruk in Libya, Northern Africa, had become a transit hub and the smugglers treated people like goods to be traded.

You have spent some time with smugglers, you wrote a book about it, so what does it mean exactly?

Well, I have to admit that it really depends on the smugglers you speak to, the smuggler you meet, because I think this is a part of, let's say, some orientalist narrative with the journalists.

Sometimes we put on place, because all the smugglers I speak to, they say, my first concern is the safety of my clients, because if I treat them like goods, if I treat them like slaves, then nobody wants to travel with me.

So sometimes it happens, very often it happens, especially in a spot like Libya, for example, sometimes northern Tunisia, sometimes Turkey.

But it's not a general rule who is run by the smugglers, because if you, going back to the very beginning of our conversation, if you are in a remote village of the Afghan province of Errat, and you ask for a smuggler and you ask your friends, who was your smuggler, who was your agent, the second question will be after the name, okay, how did they treat you?

Mm-hmm.

Were they violent?

Do they extort too much money to you?

And so on.

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

So reputation is something very important for the network.

So we don't have to think that violence is the first aim, the first goal of the smugglers.

Sometimes very often they use violence, because we have to think that they are forced to manage a lot of migrants, they call them clients, sometimes in specific and dangerous areas for them, because maybe there are some police patrols, because they have like three, four hours of window time in order to let the ship go to the Mediterranean Sea.

It's a very complicated job, because we are talking about logistic, we are talking about security, food, water, corrupting police.

So it's very, very complicated.

That's why we need a lot of people involved in this criminal activity.

So, okay, it could happen.

Probably the clients are perceived like goods from some smuggler, but it's not their aim.

They want to make money.

It was the best way to make money of many clients.

I understand that.

But how do you explain the overcrowded boards of ships?

I know it's a way how to make money, but then the condition of people, it's not good.

So it's not good for a reputation.

Yeah.

Maybe something went wrong.

Probably they hope in a different situation, like being intersettled by the Maltese Coast Guard or the Greek Coast Guard or the Italian, if they could manage to continue their trip.

But yes, this is a very big accident.

It is not something they want.

It's not something they are searching for.

Probably they were miscalculating the risk and the huge amount of money they make for with the only one boat, with the risk of being destroyed by the point of view reputation.

But again, in the specific Libyan theater, it's really a mess.

And I'm not sure all the migrants, let's say, are free to choose the right smuggler for them, because I heard many stories.

Sometimes they are forced to go to jump on the boat.

Sometimes some migrants, they told me the first time I saw the little boat, I was forced to jump in.

I refused to the smugglers and they shot on me.

So sometimes you put yourself in a cul-de-sac, like the French say, and you cannot step back.

At that specific time, you cannot.

Probably in some more crossing point of your trip, you can.

But Libya and Turkish coast is probably the worst.

Even because sometimes, let me adjust another thing, because it's crazy.

I mean, I got mad when I met migrant from Gambia.

He told me I was in a rescue mission in the Mediterranean Sea with an NGO and a saving boat.

And he told me when I see the sea, the Mediterranean Sea, I couldn't realize that it was so big.

Because the only water he saw in his life was a river, a very big river.

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

But in his limited experience, crossing water meant cross a river.

So maximum 20 minutes, 30 minutes, one hour.

And when he saw the sea, he was shocked.

So sometimes the knowledge and the experience of the migrants are very limited, very poor.

And the smugglers, they can exploit this lack of knowledge.

How long does the smugglers journey across the Mediterranean last?

Well, approximately.

Talking about specifically of the Mediterranean Sea, it could be a few hours or a maximum few days.

A few days.

Yeah.

It depends on the condition of the sea.

It depends on all the...

On the route you take.

Yes, exactly.

And it depends where do you leave the coast.

I mean, if you leave Tobruk, it's very far from Sicily.

If you leave from Kerkena or Faksa, where I worked a couple of times.

I remember I spent a few days with Tunisian smugglers from Kerkena.

This island in front of Faksa, which is a very industrial and important port in Tunisia.

And basically we spent like three, four hours sailing.

And we were about three hours to Lampedusa.

So in enough day, we could touch the Italian soil.

So it's very, very close.

But it depends on what could happen during the trip.

And the tragedy is that it's almost the last step the margains have to make.

Not necessarily the more dangerous, but it's the very last step.

And it's really a tragedy when we see they simply die after months and months of trouble.

And speaking of this specific case of the ship that sank near the Greek coast, was the ship on a typical road to Europe?

We can say that people from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria, they travel through Turkey and then Greece.

Then they have two options.

The first is through the Balkan route, which is, since 2016 is getting harder and harder and even more expensive because of the police control and everything.

But at that time, you could do it by yourself, even without smugglers.

We have seen it.

Second option is to get to a Greek island.

And sometimes it's very, very easy because if you live from Xmir in Turkish coast and then you go to Samos, it's like one kilometer.

And they met migrants who have done it swimming during the night.

But then in Greece, another problem, you usually get stuck for months or maybe a year.

I was in touch with people from Nepal and they got stuck in Athens for three years with no documents, no money, no possibility to get back or to move forward.

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

So this is people from Asia and the eastern part of the Middle East.

Or if you are from Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, usually you have two routes.

One is through Libya and the second one is through Morocco.

Through Morocco, you go to Spain, normally you go to Spain.

And from Tunisia and Libya, you usually go to Italy.

So these are the three main routes on the Mediterranean Sea.

If you take a ship, is there any experience sailor with you or is it just on yourself to coordinate, to navigate the ship?

Is it on the migrants themselves to navigate the ship to Europe or are there smugglers with them on the boat?

Well, it depends.

You can have both the possibilities.

Sometimes they are migrants who have, for example, a discount on the price on the rate of the trip.

Sometimes they are smugglers.

But even if they are smugglers, we don't have to think that they are the big boss of the organization.

They are the poor guys who can drive the boat.

But very, very often we are seeing simple migrants who in exchange of a discount of the price, they gave you a compass or a direction, a map, and they say, can you switch on the engine?

Yes.

Okay.

Up to you.

Hold the wheel and go to north.

So that's why when we see so many arrests of boat drivers, we are a little bit concerned because we know that they are not the boss.

We know that they are not the real guilt people.

They're very responsible.

It's like at the drug market.

If you arrest a small pusher here in my area, here in Milan, the day after you will find another one.

So you're not eradicating the phenomenon.

You're just arresting some poor people, desperate people.

Do we have an estimate on how many migrants traveled to Europe in the past years?

Are we talking about 100,000 of people?

Yeah.

Yeah.

It's 100,000 people.

Depending.

There are many factors who are influencing the wave of migrants.

Sometimes are wars, economical crisis, social crisis.

Sometimes are just good weather because to cross the Mediterranean Sea, you need the good weather.

So basically in spring, summer, you will find a huge number because there are the opportunities

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

to embark and to go this trip.

Okay.

I think I have to remind ourselves that, again, hundreds of people are still missing.

Many died near the Greek coast.

And according to UNHCR, just last year, over 3,000 people were recorded dead or missing at the Mediterranean.

From your perspective, from the perspective of a journalist who cover this topic, what is the solution to prevent people dying on the sea?

I think we have not just one solution.

We have a combination of factors we should and Europe should put on place.

First, humanitarian corridors.

It's unbelievable that someone who it's sure that we love asylum or another international protection, they are forced to pay someone to cross the sea, to cross a border.

This is something which is not in the European values and statements.

So first, humanitarian corridors.

Second, probably, I'm not sure because we didn't have the proof.

Probably release more, let's call it exploring visa.

If you want to take your chance in Europe, okay, you will have six months.

You can travel all over Europe.

You have a minimum amount of money, of course.

You can travel and you can find your job.

If you don't find it, you will get back.

Third, an increasing international judiciary cooperation in order to get the big bosses of the traffic and the smuggling.

Because for the Italian prosecutor, it's very, very hard to make international requests to a Pakistani prosecutor.

It means that you can arrest only the small fishes and you will never get the big fish.

Then try to harmonizing the European legislation on immigration.

If in Europe, there is a country with a different legislation about immigration, this is a vulnerability that the smugglers can exploit.

For example, in Italy, we have short-term work permit for the migrants, which are based on time and country of origin.

I found smugglers that they work on that in order to smuggle Pakistani people pretending to be Afghan people through and thanks to this kind of legislation.

Then again, probably the law enforcement should work on the social media.

Because for example, I worked with the University of Trento, with some criminologists.

We found that you can find TripAdvisor, it's a kind of TripAdvisor for smuggling on Facebook, Instagram, etc.

So trips are being coordinated on Facebook and social sites.

Exactly.

So we found dozens of Turkish and Libyan smugglers with their official page on Facebook saying, okay, in one week we're going to leave from Tobruk, the price is a huge discount for kids.

Please call this number Viber for more information.

Okay, so also tech companies can focus on that.

[Transcript] Vinohradská 12 / People Smugglers - Who Are They?

Exactly.

Because if you manage to get inside this parallel network on the social media, you can get a lot of information about the criminal networks.

So this is another great thing.

And the last thing, again, by the point of view of the police forces, probably share the more data they can about the smugglers.

Share information all over Europe in order to avoid that we can have a smuggler who are working for 15 years and sending people to death.

And this is something we cannot afford.

Jampolo, thank you very much for sharing your experience.

Thank you for your time and thank you for your answers.

Thank you.

It has been a pleasure.

And that's all for today.

I spoke to Jampolo Muzumacci, an Italian journalist and the author of a book called Confessions of a People Smuggler.

Thank you for listening.