

The Making of Migrant Smugglers as a Security Threat by the United Kingdom from 2014 to 2020 in the Annual Reports of the National Crime Agency: The Concept of Framing as a Political Tool

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DGSi Working Paper No. 3, 2023



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Foreword by Olga Demetriou

The last decade has seen an increasingly ferocious crackdown on unauthorised migration across the globe, which continues to result in migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, the US-Mexico border, the Sahara, the Pacific, and elsewhere. Along with this comes also a reduced access to rights and increased levels of violence and hardship for people who continue to be on the move and to make it past borders. Adversity is also faced by those who try to help, through sustained policies of criminalising NGOs, humanitarians, and solidarity activists. A major tool in the crackdown are policies targeting human smuggling, which seek to broaden the scope of anti-trafficking legislation and tackle unauthorised migration under the umbrella of organised crime.

Claire Chauffard explores how “human smuggling” is framed in this context and how it ends up becoming a blunt instrument that does not ultimately address the crimes of exploitation but instead criminalises victims. The paper offers a close reading of the discourses that frame the UK’s approach to human smuggling as organised crime through a reading of annual reports of the National Crime Agency spanning a period of 5 years. The analysis helps the author identify the omissions and misrepresentations that make these instruments blunt and is in this sense instructive in helping us understand the elements through which the securitisation of migration is constructed. Claire contextualises this for the case of the UK within the environment of polarisation and migrant-phobia that surrounded Brexit and its aftermath, reminding us that such securitisation works through dynamics of global processes (in developing tools and discourses that target smuggling) and local and national concerns (as in the case of Brexit).

This Working Paper is drawn from an excellent Durham Global Security Institute (DGSi) MSc. Dissertation. It showcases student work at its best: original, relevant, and rigorous. It has been edited by Rachael Rhoades and we are grateful to Claire for giving permission for the dissertation to be published as a DGSi Working Paper.

Abstract

The United Kingdom's (UK) relation towards migration has a long and complex history dating back to the 1950s. While the UK witnesses a high level of yearly international authorised immigration since the 1900s, it appears that unauthorised migration presents a significant issue for the UK and a life-threatening endeavour for the migrants themselves. Thousands of migrants die during their journey from their home-country to the UK every year. Many states, including the UK, perceive human smugglers as the primary reason for this issue. This resulted in a rise in anti-human smuggling policies in recent years.

This dissertation uses frame analyses to answer the following research question: *How has the Government of the United Kingdom framed international human smuggling to the UK in light of the so-called 'migrant crisis' between 2014 and 2020 in the Annual Reports of the National Crime Agency?*

Several conclusions are drawn following the careful review of the of the National Crime Agency (NCA) reports. Firstly, the NCA securitises human smugglers by framing them as *criminals, exploiters of the 'vulnerable' and vulnerabilities, and threats*. These framings have tremendous implications for human smugglers' lives as well as for the lives and security of unauthorised migrants. Indeed, such framings allow the UK government to justify enhanced attention to border control and the countering of unauthorised migration, to round-up public and private support and funds, and to promote itself as the forefront actor leading the fight against unauthorised migration. Secondly, confusion prevails in the NCA reports on who exactly the victims of the “organised immigration crime” are. Notably, it appears that the NCA considers the UK and its institutions as the primary victims of human smugglers. Lastly, the NCA reports claim to be of great value to the UK government as governmental agencies shape them and, in return shape UK policymaking. However, the lack of many essential components such as data, references, and definitions in the NCA reports questions the legitimacy and objectivity of the NCA reports and thus the information from which the UK government bases its policies.

Keywords: Human Smugglers, Migration, United Kingdom, Framing, Political Discourse.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank dearly my supervisor Prof. Dr. Raphaela Kormoll who allowed me to further my knowledge on this topic and to fully comprehend the implications of this dissertation. Prof. Dr. Kormoll provided me over the course of this dissertation many valuable insights into the topic and different perspectives on the global context. Although writing this dissertation has been challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Prof. Dr. Kormoll made this virtual experience very pleasant. I would like to thank her for her constant words of encouragements.

Secondly, I want to thank my dear friends Alexia Lafeuille and Oriane Wisser for having allowed me to discuss my dissertation with them and for providing me with valuable feedback. I want to thank them as well for having been there for me emotionally. Lastly, I would like to thank my family Philippe Chauffard, Maya Chauffard and Aline Chauffard, for having helped me achieve my goals and for being constant supporters.

About the Author

Claire Chauffard boasts an interdisciplinary background encompassing politics, with a focus on international relations, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. Additionally, she possesses a strong foundation in law, holding a GDL and an LLM in International and European Human Rights Law. Claire Chauffard's primary area of interest revolves around exploring the role of gender within the realm of human rights, particularly in the context of conflict prevention. Furthermore, Claire Chauffard has taken her expertise to the next level by establishing her own consultancy firm, Empower Rights. Through Empower Rights, she collaborates with companies, guiding them in integrating a Human Rights-based approach into their CSR policies and initiatives.

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Abbreviations

EU	European Union
EUNAVFOR Med	European Union Naval Force Mediterranean
NCA	National Crime Agency
NHS	National Health Service
OIC	Organised Immigration Crime
UK	United Kingdom
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

1. Introduction

According to the European Union (EU), Europe has faced an unprecedented migration crisis since 2015. Consequently, the EU considers the fight against human smuggling a priority (Gestri, 2016, p. 22). Europol claims that 90% of the unauthorised migration¹ to Europe happens through forms of "facilitation services", including human smuggling (Albahari, 2018, p. 125). Human smuggling refers to "the facilitation, for financial or other material gain, of irregular entry into a country where the migrant is not a national or resident (...) [an] opportunity created by the need or desire of people to escape not just poverty and lack of employment opportunities but also natural disaster, conflict or persecution" (UNODC, n.d., C.). Human trafficking, however, refers to "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit [...] [t]he traffickers often use violence or fraudulent employment agencies and fake promises of education and job opportunities to trick and coerce their victims" (UNODC, n.d., B.). The important distinction here is that human *trafficking* relates to an involuntary action where the "victims are exploited," while human *smuggling* is voluntary (UNHCR, n.d., C.).²

As unauthorised migrants widely use human smuggling, EU countries consider the method a predominant security issue. Yet, for many asylum seekers, crossing borders without authorization can be dangerous and possibly life-threatening (Albahari, 2018, p. 123; Jungblut, 2017, p. 388). Together, these factors encouraged most EU countries to bolster their anti-smuggling policies through new channels such as the Migrant Smuggling Protocol (Carrera, 2020, p. 16).

¹ The researcher is conscious of the negative connotations and implications of the word 'illegal migrant'. Thus, the action of arriving in a country informally and without the correct documentation will be referred to as 'unauthorised migrants' and 'unauthorised immigration'.

² This dissertation will only examine human smuggling.

Migration is perceived as a threat to many European countries' "national and societal security" (Nadig, 2002, p. 1). However, according to social constructivists and pluralists, "security is a social construct", created by governments *for a purpose* (Nadig, 2002, p. 2, emphasis mine). Therefore, "human smuggling is not by definition, a national security threat but is made to be one" (Nadig, 2002, p. 21). Thus, it appears that to justify the fight against migration, EU countries are framing human smugglers as violators of human rights. EU countries justify their enhanced anti-smuggling policies based on "humanitarian concerns" (Stoyanova, 2020, p. 439). Yet, according to many scholars, their true aim is to prevent migration to Europe in the first place, as they perceive immigration as an economic and social burden (Albahari, 2018, p.128; Doornik, 2013, p. 116; Nadig, 2002, p. 9).

This topic has garnered attention since June 23, 2016, when the UK decided via national referendum to leave the EU (Chang, 2018, p.2348, 2353). The Leave supporters framed immigration as the reasons for low wages and low public services; immigration was blamed for the rise of terrorist attacks in Europe and the heightened sense of insecurity (Chang, 2018, p.2352). While the Remain supporters emphasised the benefits of immigration and an open market, the votes failed to materialise (Chang, 2018, p. 2353). Given this context, it is important to understand how framing played a significant role in shaping public opinion of immigration and human smuggling. Therefore, this paper will explore the following research question: how has the government of the United Kingdom framed international human smuggling to the UK in light of the so-called 'migrant crisis' between 2014 and 2020 in the Annual Reports of the National Crime Agency? This study aims to further our understanding of how speech is used as a tool to achieve political goals.

The subsequent section (2) will provide background information on both the UK sentiment towards migration and the history of human smuggling in the EU and UK. The literature review (3) will shed light on existing literature covering unauthorised migration to

the UK, the response of the UK government to unauthorised migration, and human smugglers. Section (4) will present the study's methodology and the theoretical framework, followed by data analysis and findings in section (5). Lastly, sections (6) and (7) will discuss the implications of these findings.

2. Background Information

2.1. UK Sentiment Towards Migration

Since 2010, it has been estimated that the UK receives an average of 25,400 asylum applications, of which less than 50% are granted on average (Green, 2019, n.d.). Academics estimate that ~120,000 children and 725,000 adults are living under unauthorised conditions in the UK (Jolly, 2018, p. 190 & Bloch et al, 2011, p. 1288). Interestingly, while the numbers of unauthorised migrants entering the UK are on the rise, the number of unauthorised migrants deported from the country is decreasing yearly (Green, 2019, n.d.). It is estimated that the presence of unauthorised migrants in the UK is costing the government £1.6 billion per year (Green, 2019, n.d.). Resentment towards migration has also grown, with 77% of the UK expressing concern over migration and approximately 70-80% of the UK supporting governmental measures to end unauthorised migration (Green, 2019, n.d.).

2.2. History of Human Smuggling in the EU and UK

Since the 1980s, human smuggling has spread within the EU (Shelley, 2014, p.2). At the time, Europe only accepted a small percentage of asylum seekers, thus few individuals could enter the EU legally (Shelley, 2014, p.2). The simultaneous demand for migration to the EU and the low acceptance rates have invited a new business opportunity. Thus, human smuggling surged both in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and the Arab Spring (Shelley, 2014, p.3, 6).

This surge prompted European governments to prioritise anti-smuggling measures (Shelley, 2014, p.3).

Every year thousands of migrants die trying to cross borders without authorisation, whether by accident or by systematic killings; the majority of these deaths remain unreported (UNODC, 2018, A., p. 9). Human smugglers range "from small groups to complex international organisations" (Shelley, 2014, p.8). Human smuggling is also facilitated mainly by "high levels of corruption in transit countries" (Shelley, 2014, p.10).

3. Literature Review

Unauthorised migration to the UK has long been a concern for British policymakers, the public, and a key focus of academic research. On one hand, literature on unauthorised migration has focussed primarily on how migrants were perceived once in the UK. They were typically perceived as being responsible for many criminal activities and putting the economic safety of the UK at risk by, for example, "'sponging' off the welfare state and 'bleeding' the National Health Service (NHS) dry" (Tammes, 2017, p. 145). On the other hand, literature on UK migration policy studies the rules and restrictions that apply to EU migrants who have already entered the UK, rather than on EU international migration (Peers, 2016; Sredanovic, 2020 & Currie, 2016). The role of smugglers in this process has not been as thoroughly addressed.

Unauthorised migration is perceived as the "most salient topic in the UK public debate" (Barlai et al, 2017, p.341). Migration to the UK is mainly motivated by "former colonial-imperial links" and by beliefs that the UK represents economic and social opportunity, particularly for its "kinship networks, language and culture" (Bloch et al, 2011, p. 1292). Many people choose the UK because of potential presence of family, friends, and homeland communities (Bloch et al, 2011, p. 1292). It is also common for unauthorised migrants to enter

the UK on a visa, but remain once it expires (Bloch et al, 2011, p. 1292, 1295). Once in the UK, unauthorised migrants face a variety of hurdles. According to British law, and the Immigration Act 2016, unauthorised migrants are not allowed to work; if they are caught by the authorities, they risk losing their wages and being deported (Fudge, 2018, p.558). Paradoxically, what makes an unauthorised migrant "attractive to employers, [is] their submissive malleability as rightless outsiders who perform the undignified tasks that natives shun", is precisely what makes them allegedly unfit for society (Fudge, 2018, p.562). Furthermore, due to regulated access to welfare, many unauthorised migrants are often exposed to physical and/or emotional harm (Jolly, 2018, p. 194,195,196). In short, once in the UK, unauthorised migrants often face an unwelcoming and "hostile environment" (Fudge, 2018, p.558).

Several scholars have identified common themes of framing migration throughout EU member states. Willgård argues that many countries responded to unauthorised migrants by portraying "migrants as threats" throughout the so-called EU migration crisis (2019, p.1). Additionally, EU media and governments framed migration and immigrants as responsible for "insecurity and disease" as well as linking migration to "crime, rioting, drug use, sexual promiscuity, welfare sponging, [...] religious fanaticism and terrorism" (Balabanova, 2010, p. 383). This narrative caused many borders to close (Willgård, 2019, p.1). Most EU states have responded to unauthorised migrants by criminalising them through "repressive responses", including criminal law and penalties (Brouwer, 2017, p.101). This trend is called "crimmigration", implying the use of criminal law within immigration law (Brouwer, 2017, p.101). Overall, the responses of EU countries to unauthorised migrants triggered "a vicious circle [in which] the restrictions generate irregular migration, increasing the risks and costs to migrants and their dependence on smuggling networks, the latter turns to more sophisticated methods to avoid controls and hence, of course, provide reasons for even more restrictions and

heightened controls" (Triandafyllidou, 2018, p. 213, 214; see also Nadig, 2002). In sum, it appears that the general government response to unauthorised migrants is to place them at the centre of national security issues. Indeed, the EU responded to unauthorised migrants by creating different migration control institutions such as the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med) (Smith, 2016, p. 4). EUNAVFOR Med's main function was to "stop migration 'flows'" (Smith, 2016, p.4). Frontex, another EU border control institution, frames migrants as a security and humanitarian issue to as a way to legitimise themselves (Willgård, 2019, p.1, 69).

Significant literature has also focused on the UK government's response to unauthorised migrants. The British government has passed many laws since the 1970s to put an end to unauthorised migration. These laws used two different approaches: preventing unauthorised migrants from entering the UK and removing unauthorised migrants already present in the UK. Since the 2000s, the UK has passed different laws granting new powers to border control agencies and officials. The Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 and the UK border Act 2007, for example, allows them to detain any person on arrival to the UK "to verify his or her documents" (Silverman, 2012, p. 1139). To try to push out already present unauthorised migrants, the UK passed laws such as the Alien Act 2004 and the 1980 Social Security Act, which removes "the welfare support from families of failed asylum seekers" and is perceived by scholars as a way to "starve out" unauthorised migrants (Couper, Santamaria, 1984, p. 445 & Silverman, 2012, p. 1139). Another example is the criminalisation of people who (in)directly and (un)knowingly help unauthorised migrants (Webber, 2014, p. 86). For example, people employing unauthorised migrants or renting them properties are at risk of facing criminal charges (Webber, 2014, p. 86,87,88; Carrera et al, 2020, p.82). Additionally, these laws heavily rely on the detention of unauthorised migrants (Silverman, 2012, p. 1132). From "reporting centres, transit centres, short-term holding facilities near airports and seaports, [to] caravans and prison

cells”, the UK government relies on various facilities to control unauthorised migrants (Silverman, 2012, p. 1132). Whereas detention centres are supposed to be a status of exemption, the UK government has been trying to legitimise their use by deeming them "regrettable but necessary" (Silverman, 2012, p. 1134,1135,1142). In short, the UK’s response to increased immigration has been highly controversial.

Significantly, most unauthorised migrants arriving to the UK and the EU are aided by human smugglers. Indeed, much of the literature emphasizes the methods and people behind human smuggling. It is estimated that every year four million people risk their lives using human smugglers, paying the smugglers significant sums (Kaiser, 2001, p.33). Human smuggling has rapidly grown over the last few years, becoming one of the most profitable forms of organised crime (Kaiser, 2001, p.33). The cost of a single journey can vary from \$1,000 from Syria to Europe to \$11,000 from Afghanistan to Europe (Kingsley, 2015, n.d.).

Although human smuggling differs from human trafficking, in many instances people being smuggled are at risk of becoming victims of trafficking (Ventrella, 2017, p.69, 70). Indeed, if unauthorised migrants cannot pay for their passage once they have reached their destination, finding themselves indebted to the human smuggler, they resort to alternative means of payment like drug dealing (Ventrella, 2017, p.70, 71). Furthermore, during the journey, an unauthorised migrant can fall victim to modern slavery by being forced to work or partake in illegal activities such as sexual exploitation (Ventrella, 2017, p.70, 71).

Presently, anti-smuggling policies are relatively new and still under development (Balch & Geddes, 2011, p.28). Most countries seem to adopt similar approaches to anti-smuggling policies which aim to fight "an external threat at their national border" and, again, prioritise national security (Nadig, 2002, p.13). European states’ positions toward human smuggling can be summarised by the conceptualisation of 'us' vs 'them', with 'them' representing that external threat (Nadig, 2002, 16). This European approach not only

exacerbates the plight of unauthorised migrants' within these countries *and* during their attempts to reach them but also leads to "social stress for the receiving society" (Nadig, 2002, p. 21). In the EU, human smuggling is governed by the 2002 Facilitators Package, which is composed of Directive 2002/90 and Decision 2002/946, which work "to prevent the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence" (Carrera et al, 2020, p.15). Furthermore, in the EU, anti-smuggling laws are embedded in national migration laws with punishments similar to criminal law, demonstrating such laws are tools of "migration management" (Carrera et al, 2020, p.183). One of Europe's main methods to counter human smuggling is the criminalisation of all entities that could directly or indirectly help migrant smuggling. For example, transport companies have been pressured and put under scrutiny to ensure that they do not help people cross borders (Vaitkeviciute, 2020, p.138,139).

4. Theoretical Framework & Methodology

The following chapter introduces this paper's theoretical framework and methods used. This paper examines a single case study – the UK – and analyses its data qualitatively through content analysis.

4.1. Theoretical Framework

Framing and securitisation theories have gained a lot of attention in recent decades, especially in the fields of international relations, security studies and migration studies (Carvalho, 2014, p.164, Willgård, 2019, p.5, Buzan et al, 2016, p.25). Both theories offer explanations for how political actors communicate and interact and how political events can be triggered by public opinion.

Recently, framing theory has been used in many different fields, including psychology, sociology, and lately, politics (Carvalho, 2014, p.164, Willgård, 2019, p.5). Framing theory essentially refers to the idea that a framing actor will highlight some aspects of a perceived reality to promote a particular point of view and agenda (Willgård, 2019, p.5; Goffman, 1974, n.d.). Framing is communicated through spoken and written language (Jorgensen, 2012, p.290, Carvalho, 2014, p.166). Overall, framing theory looks at the use of language by different social actors to build a common public opinion over a given event by highlighting certain aspects of that event (Fletcher, 2009, p.801). Framing allows political actors to "mobilise potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support and to demobilise antagonists" (Carvalho, 2014, p.164). Therefore, framing theory examines the political intent and desires of framing actors by analysing the frames they apply to a particular event or issue.

Framing is highly influenced by different criteria. Firstly, how an audience will receive a framing is dependent on three factors: 1) resonance, 2) salience, and 3) cultural background (Carvalho, 2014, p.166). Resonance refers to the credibility and legitimacy of both the framing actor and the message conveyed (Carvalho, 2014, p.166). Salience alludes to the importance of the topic at hand within the larger audience (Carvalho, 2014, p.166). Lastly, the framing of an event will be received differently depending on the cultural norms and "basic assumptions" of the audience (Carvalho, 2014, p.166).

Whereas framing theory examines what frame is used to communicate an event, securitisation theory offers a frame of reference, namely the securitisation frame. Securitisation has been central to the framing of irregular migration, playing a major role in the surrounding literature (Buzan, et. al., 2016, p.25; Güler, 2019, p. 16). Securitisation theory usually – but not exclusively – refers to military events and defines a threat as something which endangers the security of a state (Eroukhmanoff, 2020, p.1). Therefore, the securitising of an event or

phenomena can have drastic consequences as it can influence public opinion and enable the securitising actor to take unprecedented action.

According to securitisation theory, an event is constructed as a threat by a speech act (Stritzel, 2014, p.13). A speech act refers to the raw information conveyed by an actor as well as the underlying intention behind sharing that information, influencing how it is delivered (Licea-Haquet et al, 2019, p.44). Consequently, a security threat through securitisation is socially constructed and constantly evolving (Güler, 2019, p.16). Therefore, securitisation paired with framing theory is useful as framing theory helps discern an actor's intention when presenting an event, and securitisation offers one method among many to frame an issue.

Both framing theory and securitisation theory are central to the topic of human smugglers. Securitising migrants as a threat and a “danger to society” allows a government to “sustain security policies”, use migration as a “competition between political parties”, and can help the government implement what they perceive to be the core values and identities of a society (Huysmans, 2008, p. 31,35). Thus, this paper explores how human smugglers are framed in the UK and examines the possibility of using migrant smugglers as a securitisation tool. By identifying and analysing the frames assigned to human smugglers, it contributes to a deeper understanding of this issue.

4.2. Methodology

It is necessary to briefly explain this paper’s research methodology. The following section outlines the use of the case study method and the timeframe under study, provides justification for the research design and data collection methods used, and explains the chosen data analysis methods.

This paper examines a single case study, allowing for a more detailed investigation of the phenomena (Gustafsson, 2017, p.3). The chosen case, the UK, represents a unique scenario

which examines a once influential EU member amid its withdrawal from the EU. Single case study research has been criticised for hyperfocus on an individual situation, neglecting the larger context surrounding the event (Strauss, 2010, p.2). Yet, the post-Brexit UK case represents a situation so unique, it deserves isolated attention.

This case study will examine events from 2014 to 2020. A timeframe chosen to include the start of the migration flows following the 2008 recession and the drastic increase of immigration after 2013, to incorporate the 2015 so-called “migrant crisis”, and cover the official withdrawal of the UK from the EU. Thus, this timeframe highlights significant events which have influenced the framing of public and political discourses around migration and human smugglers.

Using a seven-text corpus composed of annual reports between 2014 and 2020, the paper analyses qualitative data collected from the NCA - the “National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime” - which includes so-called organised immigration crime (National Crime Agency, n.d., Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 15).³ The NCA is a UK governmental institution that aims to fight serious and organised crime, characterised as the “greatest risk to the UK” (National Crime Agency, n.d.).

The NCA is officially an independent agency, but its funding is provided by public finances (National Crime Agency, n.d.). As a result, the NCA maintains strong ties with the UK government and serves as a guiding force for other governmental institutions, such as the “police and Crime Commissioners, operational law enforcement partners, the security services, and the private and third sectors” (NCA, 2019, p.1, National Crime Agency, n.d.). Their primary objective, as stated by the NCA itself, is to be the leading institution in combating “high harm, high impact offenders” (NCA, 2020, p.1; NCA, 2018, p.5), reducing their overall

³ Available at www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk.

“capability, infrastructure and influence” (NCA, 2019, p. 1) and “coordinat[ing] the national response” to such crimes (NCA, 2015, p.4). In sum, it is essential to recognise that the NCA not only influences policymaking through its reports but also operates as an agency dedicated to countering these types of crimes (NCA, 2016, p.1,2).

Significantly, in all of its reports, human smugglers and what the NCA refers to as organised immigration crime (OIC) are highlighted every year as a serious and organised crime. Organised immigration crime is defined by the NCA as the illegal entry or moving of persons across borders (NCA).

The data will be analysed using a qualitative content analysis method. Content analysis involves the examination of contextual information and the explicit content, as well as implicit context and meaning, through language markers such as metaphors and comparisons (Dunn & Neumann, 2019, p.111, Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 5). The author applies this method by 1) determining the validity and credibility of the data used (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p.3), 2) carefully reading the data (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p.18), and 3) highlighting essential parts of the data about human smugglers and categorising it into overarching themes and subcategories (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p.9, 11).

5. Findings & Analysis

5.1 Introduction - Overview of the Main Topics

In the NCA reports analysed, four prominent frames were revealed, in which human smugglers are framed as *criminals (1), threats (2) exploiters of vulnerabilities and of (3) vulnerable people, and (4) the UK as the primary victim of human smugglers.*

The NCA not only portrays human smugglers as criminals for human smuggling but also for human trafficking, modern slavery, child and sexual abuse, and terrorism. Additionally, the NCA portrays human smugglers as a threat to migrants, to UK citizens, the reputation of the UK, and the security of the UK. In addition, human smugglers are framed as people exploiting the vulnerabilities of the UK - such as its borders - and as exploiting vulnerable people for financial gain. Lastly, the NCA reports are unclear on whether human smugglers or migrants are the main threat to the UK. The reports refer interchangeably to the perpetrator of immigration crime as the migrant and the human smuggler. This is significant as it also contributes to the framing of migrants as criminals.

In addition, the NCA reports frame the UK as the *primary victim* of human smugglers. Significantly, this focus fails to consider other potential victims. The NCA also frames international actors such as other countries as partly responsible for the crime of human smuggling. Indeed, the NCA constantly links human smuggling to decisions taken by international actors, ultimately blaming those actors for inaction.

5.2 Different Uncovered Frames

5.2.1 Human Smugglers as Criminals, Exploiters, and a Threat

The NCA's annual reports employ the *threat frame* to portray human smuggling as an imminent threat to the UK. The UK government defines a threat as "malicious attacks", which the UK would be subjected to in the next five years (Cabinet Office, 2021, p.3). This definition is problematic as the use of the term "malicious" refers to a *conscious desire* to harm. Yet, in many instances, human smugglers desire to do good by helping, rather than harming, unauthorised migrants. Portraying an actor as capable of and willing to inflict damage is commonly used by governments to influence policies (Güler, 2019, p. 16). Indeed, once an

actor is securitised, a government is no longer bound by typical norms and can thus respond to the issue in whichever way it desires (Güler, 2019, p. 16).

For instance, the NCA frames the overall category of “Serious and Organised Crime” as a threat to the UK, including human smugglers in this category. Moreover, it frames serious and organised criminals by referring to them and their actions as blatant ‘threats’. In the seven reports, the word ‘threat’ is mentioned 517 times, for example, “[...] *the involvement of OGCs in facilitating crossings, alongside the high risk to life, makes this a priority threat*” (NCA, 2020, p.28). This point is stressed by the portrayal of serious and organised criminals as a large-scale threat: “*36,600 organised criminals in 5,300 groups [...] that directly affect the UK*” (NCA, 2014, p.8). Essentially, as mentioned in the 2015 NCA report, serious and organised criminals are framed as responsible for most UK issues, “[*having*] *an impact on almost every aspect of the UK’s wellbeing*” (NCA, 2015, p. 3).

Specifically, the NCA considers all serious and organised criminals as a threat to the country’s *national security, borders, economy, national and international reputation, public services, socio-economic wellbeing, infrastructure, institutions, and integrity*. In many instances, the NCA states that serious and organised crime is impacting institutional and governmental functioning of the UK. For example, the 2015 NCA report mentions that serious and organised crime is a “*pervasive national security threat with far-reaching effects on the UK’s social and economic wellbeing and international reputation,*” (p.1) and in 2019 that such crimes “*[u]ndermine the UK’s economy, integrity, infrastructure and institutions through their criminality*” (NCA, 2019, p.1). The NCA also frames serious and organised criminals as impacting individuals, in that they affect “*the Government’s ability to fund the UK’s public services, and help families and individuals with targeted financial support*” (NCA, 2014, p. 21).

Organised immigration crime (OIC) and smugglers are also framed as a direct threat to the UK. Indeed, the NCA emphasizes that OIC is one of the “*top five threats to the UK*” (2016, p.3). A list of the NCA’s perceived most dangerous threats in no particular order includes 1) Child sexual exploitation and abuse, 2) Organised immigration crime, 3) Cyber-crime, 4) Firearms, and 5) High-end money laundering (NCA, 2016, p.3). The NCA hierarchizes threats, and organised immigration crime is seen as a top priority. This prioritization has significant implications as it allows the government to justify spending to counter this so-called threat. For example, in 2020, the UK gave £114 million to the French government to help counter unauthorised immigration (Green, 2020, n.d.). Yet, this only represents a fraction of the number the UK spent to counter immigration that year. Additionally, OIC is often framed as a threat to the UK's security, purporting that it exposes UK borders and risks the lives of the migrants being smuggled (NCA, 2014, p.2).

By portraying serious and organised criminals and OIC as significant threats to both UK institutions and migrant lives, the NCA characterises human smugglers as capable of doing damage. This framing has tremendous implications for the future of human smuggling in the UK. By portraying human smugglers as a critical threat to the UK and its reputation, economic situation, borders and security, the NCA securitises human smuggling and presents smugglers as a priority for policymakers. Thus, policymakers will be preoccupied with these issues at the expense of other crimes. Finally, this securitisation helps justify and generate financial support from the private and public sectors.

Many different countries also frame migrants this way, blaming them for "crime, rioting, drug use, sexual promiscuity, welfare sponging, [...] religious fanaticism and terrorism” (Willgård, 2019, p.1, Balabanova, 2010, p. 383). Since 2000, the UK have drafted several policies which further complicate immigration procedures, leading to a public discourse which suggests immigrants are a negative influence on the UK (Silverman, 2012, p. 1139).

This portrayal of migrants as threats caused many borders to close (Willgård, 2019, p.1). Because migrants have been framed in a similar way to human smugglers, it can be assumed that the portrayal of human smugglers as threats will only provide a further incentive to countries, specifically the UK, to continue to close borders and reinforce border controls to prevent migration.

In addition, the NCA uses a *criminal frame* to portray human smugglers. Using the term “organised immigration crime” to define human smugglers frames them as criminals. Often, the NCA portrays human smugglers as criminals involved with illegal activities, such as helping unauthorised migrants cross the borders without authorisation and, in some instances, assisting in activities which lead to the deaths of unauthorised migrants (NCA, 2017, p.17). Additionally, according to UK law and the NCA, helping someone enter or remain in the UK illegally is a criminal act (NCA, 2014, p.25). This is confirmed by the portrayal of their activity as illegal (2016, p.21).

Yet, within this negative framework the NCA still portrays human smugglers as intelligent and efficient, stating that they are “*agile in adapting their behaviour in response to law enforcement activity at the UK border*” (NCA, 2015, p. 36). Portraying them as intelligent and adaptable to the evolving conditions of border control renders them a more volatile – and therefore more significant – threat. The NCA has provided only vague information regarding the way human smuggling functions. For example, “*most people smuggling crime groups comprise loosely affiliated networks of independent facilitators of differing nationalities, but some are coordinated and relatively large*” (NCA, 2017, p.17). Yet, the NCA also portrays human smugglers as part of a complex criminal organisation rather than individual criminals (NCA, 2017, p. 17). In short, portraying human smugglers as highly organized, meticulous criminals enables the use of harsher defence policies.

Furthermore, in the NCA reports, human smugglers are linked to organised immigration crime and other crimes. These other crimes include terrorism, identity crime, corruption, money laundering, modern slavery, child sexual exploitation and abuse. Notably, explicit associations with *human trafficking*, and overall serious and organised crime “*are increasingly overlapped*” (NCA, 2016, p.13, NCA, 2018, p. 8, 25). Again, the NCA has asserted this criminal frame over human smugglers by portraying them as active in different criminal activities. For example, the NCA reports use interchangeably the terms ‘people smugglers’ and ‘people traffickers’. Therefore, the lack of a clear distinction between smuggling and trafficking blurs the lines and creates an impression that smuggling is an involuntary offence. For example, in 2019, the NCA reports state that “*OIC involves the movement of a person across borders, without legal permission or documentation*” (p. 20). This definition does not specify the need for a smuggled person's consent and could therefore easily be applied to human trafficking. Throughout all reports, not a single comprehensive definition of people smuggling or trafficking has been provided. This reinforces the confusion around human smugglers, encouraging a negative view of them. However, this frame has become less present over the years. From 2016, a distinction between ‘people smuggling’ and ‘people trafficking’ has been made. This development is of tremendous importance as it demonstrates that human smuggling and human trafficking are two very different crimes that have different impacts on societies, and hence cannot be grouped into a single category.

Portraying human smugglers as active in OIC and other criminal activities nevertheless supports the NCA’s representation of them as some of the worst criminals in the UK. Indeed, Brouwer argues that the criminalisation of migrants by politicians, policymakers and the media enable policymakers to promote repressive policy towards immigration and to enforce criminal law on migrants (Brouwer, 2017, p.101). Consequently, smuggling will become even more dangerous as smugglers will be forced to adapt to these policies, adopting more treacherous

techniques to keep from being caught. Ironically, increasing border control measures will not solve the problem of unauthorised migration; instead, it will make the use of human smugglers more necessary for potential unauthorised migrants. Hence, “crimmigration” (the use of criminal sanctions regarding unauthorised migration) triggers a vicious cycle of repressive policies and more difficult passage for migrants and thus a heightened need for human smugglers (Brouwer, 2017, p.101).

Again, vague definitions become an issue. There appears to be some intentional oversight by the NCA regarding the difference between an unauthorised migrant and human smuggler in this criminal frame. Indeed, the 2020 definition of organised immigration crime reads: *"OIC involves the facilitation by OGCs of a person across borders without legal permission or documentation. It can also involve individuals illegally remaining in a country"* (NCA, 2020, p.26). Based on this, both an unauthorised migrant and a human smuggler commit organised immigration crime. No distinction is made between the two, and no specific definition is given to the category of human smugglers. The lack of clarity here allows for free interpretation of the definition, permitting government entities to shape policies to suit their narrative. For example, they can frame policies to target what they consider to be a perpetrator of smuggling, such as someone housing an undocumented migrant. Consequently, this exposes migrants (authorised or unauthorised) and non-white British nationals in the UK to increased discrimination as all individuals will be afraid to be categorised as human smugglers (Weber, 2014, p.88).

In addition, this ambiguity has significant legal implications for migrants (Brouwer, 2017, p.101). Indeed, this vague definition exposes migrants to the same penalties or punishments as human smugglers. Finally, this uncertainty over who can be defined as a perpetrator of organised immigration crime potentially strips migrants of their possible victim status. Migrants can be victims of organised immigration crime as they are often harmed while

being smuggled (UNODC, 2018, A., p. 9). By portraying them as perpetrators, migrants are not entitled to the same rights and protections afforded to victim groups, which exacerbates migrant insecurity both during their journey *and* once they arrive in the UK. This dilemma highlights how the NCA simplifies the complex issue of immigration and human smuggling. This strengthens the criminal frame used by the NCA and UK government to push for harsher immigration policies, worsening migrant insecurity. Once again, the frames utilised by the NCA are securitising frames in which human smuggling is portrayed as a criminal activity. This frame promotes a clear-cut image in which human smugglers cannot be seen as both criminals and victims. Indeed, the securitising frame of criminals tends to rally the public against immigration/human smuggling and discourage public debate on human smugglers.

Finally, the NCA frames human smugglers as exploiters of vulnerable people and of the UK's vulnerabilities. According to the NCA, human smugglers take advantage of individuals who have the ability to facilitate the process of migrants crossing into the UK, such as border workers (NCA, 2014, p.11). It also claims that human smugglers exploit so-called 'vulnerable people'. Indeed, in the reports, the sub-section on OIC is located in the section named "*Exploitation of the vulnerable*" (NCA, 2020, p.17). This and sentences such as "*the exploitation of vulnerable people continue to be key to many SOC threats*" clearly indicate that the NCA frames human smugglers as exploiters of vulnerable people, especially of migrants (NCA, 2020, p.10).

The NCA also portrays human smugglers as exploiters of UK vulnerabilities. Indeed, according to the NCA, criminals in general misuse UK systems to their advantage, such as the "*exploitation by criminals, illegal immigrants and extremists who use the border to facilitate and enable criminality*" (NCA, 2018, p.13). In addition, these individuals are accused of document abuse, such as using "marriage and civil partnership" or the "visa system" to achieve their ends, along with the exploitation of other physical borders, such as maritime routes (NCA,

2015, p.17, NCA, 2016, p.22, NCA, 2020, p.13). Significantly, the NCA claims that financial gain is the main reason why criminals and, more specifically, human smugglers exploit individuals and the system, for example, by “*fraudulently apply[ing] for a visa, making £13 million in the process*” (NCA, 2020, p.27).

Notably, this framing of human smugglers as *exploiters of vulnerable people and vulnerabilities* contributes to the portrayal of human smugglers as ruthless individuals. This ruthlessness is a securitising move by the NCA, ultimately expressing a need for support in countering these activities. Then, this securitising framing places the UK government as the rightful actor to counter human smugglers. Thus, portraying human smugglers in such a way helps the government to reinforce the *criminal frame* and the *threat frame*.

In sum, these three frames reinforce each other and leave the door open for the UK government to adopt an ethnocentric approach to immigration. This translates into harsh policies against human smugglers to end unauthorised immigration (Jungblut, 2017, p. 388,390; Boslikov, 2018, p.40).

5.2.2 Who are the Victims of Serious and Organised Crime?

Throughout the seven NCA reports, there appears to be some confusion as to who the victims of organised immigration crime (OIC) are. Importantly, throughout the reports, attention is rarely paid to the victims. The focus is on OIC rather than on the harm done by it. Though, when the reports do mention victims, two categories emerge. The first is victims as individuals, and primarily refers to migrants. The reports mention repeatedly how, throughout their journey to the UK, migrants are being abused and face many life-threatening challenges such as “*maltreatment [...] by crime groups and continuing deaths at sea*” (NCA, 2017, p.17), “*sexual exploitation, as well as debt bondage, both during their journeys and when housed in migrants’ camps,*” (NCA, 2017, p.16) or the use of “*high-risk smuggling methods, as shown by the deaths*

of 39 Vietnamese nationals concealed in a refrigerated lorry in October 2019” (NCA, 2020, p.8). Therefore, according to the NCA, although migrants engage in human smuggling, they are also *victims* of the conditions of human smuggling. Additionally, the NCA acknowledges that sometimes the line between victim and criminal is blurred, as a victim of one crime can be coerced into committing another (NCA, 2020, p.10). Thus, to the NCA, not all victims are labelled only as such.

Notably, the NCA frames the UK government as a victim. According to the NCA, the UK government is the *main victim* of organised immigration crime. Indeed, the NCA’s definition of OIC describes it as “*the facilitated illegal movement of people across national borders, [which] represents a crime against the state. This is distinct from 'human trafficking' and MSHT, which involve movement or control of location, along with forms of exploitation, and is a crime against the person.*” (NCA, 2018, p.25). This definition suggests that the NCA’s main priority is to protect the state, rather than individuals, from this specific crime. Therefore, the two victim groups defined by the NCA are individuals, usually migrants, and the UK – placing emphasis on the latter. This framing is used to justify policy emphasis on national security to combat this so-called threat rather than having to efficiently tackle the root causes of immigration, such as international conflicts, scarcity of resources, and prosecution. In other words, this UK government victim framing enables the adoption of an ethnocentric approach to unauthorised migrants rather than a humanitarian one. This securitising frame puts the state at the centre of discussion on human smuggling, suppressing the voices of other actors such as unauthorised migrants. Therefore, by securitising human smugglers along these lines, the UK government can expedite the passing of such policies. Presenting themselves as victims of these smugglers enables the government to assert that they possess the knowledge and solutions to address the problem more effectively. This framing also simplifies the issues at hand by slotting people into rigid categories to fit the desired narrative.

Finally, the NCA frames international actors as partly responsible for the victimisation of the UK. The NCA frequently explains that serious and organised criminals come from outside of the UK. For example, “*All of the most serious crime threats are transnational,*” then offer statements like, “[...]foreign nationals are involved in all types of serious and organised crime [...]” (NCA, 2014, p. 4; NCA, 2015, p.5). This narrative suggests foreign nationals are primarily to blame for crimes committed in the UK. Moreover, political situations in other countries are framed as motivating UK crime, demonstrated by the NCA’s mention of “Libya, Syria and Ukraine” or of “ISIL in Iraq and Syria” (NCA, 2015, p.17, NCA, 2017, p.11).

Regarding OIC, the subject of immigration is international in nature, a convenient opportunity for framing OIC as an international issue. When describing human smuggling, the NCA repeatedly mentions other countries such as France, Belgium, Denmark or the Netherlands (NCA, 2017, p.18). This reinforces the belief that international actors are responsible for human smugglers and unauthorised migrants crossing into the UK. While the NCA fails to acknowledge the UK’s role in contributing to OIC, they do blame other countries’ policies for increasing OIC. For example, the NCA’s statement that “*as a result of the implementation of border restrictions by some European countries, more migrants are turning to people smugglers*” (NCA, 2016, p.21). Notably, when referring to perpetrators of human smuggling, the individuals are never characterised as British, but as, for example, “Iraqi-Kurd” or “British-based Romanian” (NCA, 2018, p.34, NCA, 2020, p.5).

In short, the NCA portrays the UK and, to a lesser extent, migrants, as victims of OIC, mostly caused by international actors. However, its reports provide no evidence to support this claim. Blaming other countries allows the UK to distance itself from the EU. It is ironic that the NCA criticises other countries for policies, such as repressive border policies, that the UK

itself implements. Consequently, it can be hypothesised that these frames and the resulting attitudes may have influenced the Brexit vote in 2016.

5.2.3 The Missing Parts of the Puzzle

The following section aims to identify what information is missing from NCA reports which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of human smugglers, an omission which ultimately subdues its framing.

First, throughout all seven NCA reports, only two of them (2019, 2020) have a bibliography. In the reports dating between 2014 and 2018, readers have no way of fact-checking the provided information. Additionally, the sources provided in the bibliographies for the 2019 and 2020 reports appear to be very biased. Of the 80 references, only two come from nongovernmental bodies (Coinmarketcap and Cifas); the rest are sourced from UK government agencies (NCA, 2019, p.52, NCA, 2020, p.62).

Second, there is a lack of data to support NCA claims. Although in the later years more data is provided, such as statistics on the costs of hiring a human smuggler from France and the UK in the 2019 report, most claims are not substantiated by evidence (NCA, 2019, p.21). While human smuggling is difficult to quantify, the NCA reports offer estimates that are unreliable. This contradicts typical government practices that rely on data to make decisions. It appears that, for the NCA, the perception of immigration crime as a single threat is enough to justify this portrayal of human smugglers without providing concrete evidence.

Finally, although the NCA provides vague definitions of human smuggling, they do not clarify the critical difference between human smuggling and human trafficking. Three out of seven reports do not define organised immigration crime (2015, 2016, 2017). In 2014, the NCA gave the following definition to human smuggling: “(...) where the irregular migrants are

essentially willing participants and where the criminals profit mainly from facilitating their migration; and human trafficking where the intention behind the facilitation is the exploitation of the irregular migrants” (NCA, 2014, p.25). This definition is the only one where consent of a smuggled person is mentioned; however, regarding human trafficking, it also states that irregular migrants can be trafficked. In 2019 and 2020, the definitions are very similar, stating that “[*Organised immigration crime*] involves the movement of a person across borders, without legal permission or documentation” (NCA, 2019, p.20). In these later definitions, there is no mention of consent.

The NCA reports lack clear definitions, data, and references, making the information provided questionable and biased. Thus, the portrayal of human smugglers seems to reflect the UK government’s perspective but should not be confused with objective truth. The NCA reports appear to shape public opinion and policymakers’ decisions. If all the above data had been provided, it would likely have weakened the successful securitisation of human smugglers. Moreover, the reports seem to oversimplify the complex issues of immigration and human smuggling, offering only a partial and biased view of the phenomena.

6. Discussion

The NCA reports provided valuable insights into how the UK view and talk about human smugglers in the public sphere.

Four securitising frames have been identified in the reports. First, human smugglers are framed as *criminals* and second, as a high-risk *threat*, justifying increased border control funding and attention from the UK government. Third, human smugglers are framed as *exploiters* of vulnerable people and vulnerabilities, further securitising their actions. Fourth, the NCA frames the UK as the *primary victim* of organised immigration crime, legitimising the government’s stance on human smugglers.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings. First, these framings will impact UK policymaking, which will not only affect millions of prospective migrants but also all unauthorised migrants already in the UK (Jolly, 2018, p. 190 & Bloch, Sigona, Zetter, 2011, p. 1288). Additionally, conditions such as climate change will increase migration to the EU and the UK (Bloch, Sigona, Zetter, 2011, p. 1289). Thus, there are tangible consequences of these framings which will impact the lives of many people.

Second, the NCA frames human smugglers as criminals and threats, allowing the UK to take unprecedented action against organised immigration crime. This has already been observed through the use of detention centres, raising concerns about human rights (Silverman, 2012, p. 1134,1135,1142; Stefanelli, 2021, p.2 & Silverman, 2012, p. 1140). Therefore, the NCA's framing may contribute to measures that endanger the well-being of unauthorised migrants. Additionally, the lack of a clear definition of human smugglers enables the UK government to include low-level offenders in their policies, such as those employing unauthorised migrants (Webber, 2014, p. 86,87,88).

Third, the NCA often frames migrants as vulnerable people. This framing is particularly dangerous as the perceived "submissive malleability as rightless outsiders" of unauthorised migrants exposes them to exploitation once in the UK (Fudge, 2018, p.562). Indeed, throughout the history of immigration, unauthorised migrants have suffered exploitation due to their vulnerable position (Fudge, 2018, p.562). However, perceiving them as vulnerable puts them at an even higher risk of being targeted for exploitation.

Fourth, the NCA's framing of international actors and other countries as responsible for human smuggling reinforces the 'us' vs 'them' paradigm adopted by many other countries to combat this perceived external threat (Nadig, 2002, 16).

Finally, these NCA frames reinforce the vicious cycle of border restriction, leading to increased risks for migrants and dependence on smuggling networks, where "[...]the latter

turns to more sophisticated methods to avoid controls and hence, of course, provide reasons for even more restrictions and heightened controls" (Triandafyllidou, 2018, p. 213, 214; see also Nadig, 2002). The adoption of these securitising frames worsens the situation by making passage to the UK more dangerous.

Ultimately, the combination of these framings have resulted in the closure of UK borders, strengthened border controls, and the increased criminalisation of migrants (Brouwer, 2017, p.101). Since 2014, 96 new migration policies have been introduced in the UK, some of which restrict legal entry based on financial independence and language proficiency (UK Government, 2021, n.d.). These policies aim to avoid "burdens on the taxpayers," while others have been introduced for heightened border control (UK Government, 2021, n.d.). Finally, even seemingly positive policies like the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme have controversial effects on unauthorised migrants, lacking true refuge for asylum seekers (UK Government, 2021, n.d.). Overall, most policies passed since 2014 have added to the challenges faced by refugees, further exacerbating the issue of human smuggling.

The NCA's framings strongly impact the lives of many people. This study highlights how the NCA presents multiple framings of human smugglers that reinforce each other, portraying them as a significant threat to UK society. These framings align with the broader framing of migration in the UK. However, it is not only the NCA's framing but also the prevailing ethnocentric culture in the UK that influences policymaking and increased border controls, as unauthorised migrants are seen as a threat to this cultural context.

7. Conclusion

This paper contributes to the field of migration studies by broadening the understanding of the framing of human smugglers. Specifically, the study answered the following research question: *How has the government of the United Kingdom framed international human smuggling to the*

UK in light of the so-called 'migrant crisis' between 2014 and 2020 in the Annual Reports of the National Crime Agency?

This paper first concludes that the NCA securitises human smugglers by framing them as *criminals, exploiters of the vulnerable and vulnerabilities, and threats*. These securitising frames have tremendous implications for the lives of human smugglers and the security of unauthorised migrants. Indeed, these framings enable the UK government to justify increased attention and funding for border control, gather public and private support, and position itself as the leading actor against unauthorised migration. Second, these reports create confusion regarding the victims of OIC, ultimately portraying the UK and its institutions as the *primary* victims, bolstering the government's credibility. However, the lack of essential components like data, references, and definitions in the NCA reports raises doubts about their legitimacy and objectivity. Moreover, these framings contribute to a harmful cycle where harsh policies drive migrants to rely on human smugglers. Overall, the NCA's framings jeopardise the lives of prospective asylum seekers and unauthorised migrants in the UK.

In conclusion, this study has expanded the understanding of how the UK perceives human smugglers and how the government frames them. However, it only generates findings regarding the actual consequences of such framing, indicating the need for further research in this area.

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