

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on illegal migration in the Mediterranean region: an empirical study

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Abstract:

The present article aims at investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on illegal migration in the Mediterranean region. We argue that COVID-19 has negatively affected the number of illegal migrants due to the restrictions related to the containment of the virus. Empirical results show that the pandemic was temporarily correlated with a decrease in the number of illegal border-crossings.

Keywords: migrant; illegal migration; COVID-19; restrictions; Mediterranean

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has come to be one of the most important and unexpected events of the 21st century. By the end of 2021, estimates suggested over than 6 million deaths attributable to the pandemic. However, it also had a significant impact on various economic and social issues. Economies have experienced the worst recession since the end of WW2, with a decline of 5.2% in 2020. (IOM, 2022, p. 151) On the other hand, human mobility has been severely impacted by the pandemic, both within and between countries, through different control mechanisms such as national and international travel restrictions. Consequently, international legal migration –as a human mobility- has been significantly limited by COVID-related international travel restrictions, as highlighted by the 2022 IOM UN Migration Report.

Nonetheless, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on illegal migration has not been empirically investigated, due to different reasons. Admittedly, capturing data on illegal migration is extremely challenging. Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 restrictions are directly related to legal human movements, and therefore do not apply to illegal migration. Consequently, the relationship between the latter and the COVID-19 pandemic is less evident. So, this research paper is intended to fill this research gap by exploring the trend in illegal migration in the Mediterranean region on the Western, Central and Eastern Mediterranean route, following the outbreak of the pandemic.

Empirical data:

The analysis is based on the illegal border-crossing statistics generated and monthly updated by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). To capture the COVID-19-related travel restrictions, we used the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.

Theoretical argument:

In this analysis, we have adopted the IOM definition of the illegal migration which stipulates that: “irregular migration is a movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the state of origin, transit or destination.” (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 116)

2. Existing explanations of illegal migration:

Illegal migration has generally been explained and/or understood either through the lens of the state or the migrants.

Regarding state-based explanations, the so-called “gap hypothesis” is usually referred to in explaining states’ attitudes towards illegal migrants. According to these approaches, illegal migration results from four existing gaps (Czaika & Haas, 2011, p. 42). The first one is of a discursive kind, which illustrates the distance between political discourses and effective measures. The second one is an implementation gap between written regulations and what is actually implemented. The third gap is related to the efficacy of the implemented policy. Finally, the fourth gap is concerned with the absence of any accurate knowledge about illegal migration due to the impossibility to quantify it. Indeed, a policy cannot be efficient in an environment of incomplete and insufficient information. As a result, illegal migration is either a consequence of a state choice (discursive and implementation gap) or a state failure (efficacy and epistemological gap).

According to the former, the question is why hosting states are – sometimes- permissive with illegal migration, while the latter investigates the causes of the state failure in containing the situation. The advocates of the state-choice approaches tried to find rational explanations mainly through highlighting the economic relevance of illegal migration in providing precarious, unskilled and therefore exploitable workforce in industrialized countries (Sassen, 1998; Castles & Kosack, 1973; Portes, 1978). Other

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scholars focused on the state as a mediator between different social actors and interests in Western democracies. Accordingly, the state's attitude towards illegal migration is a result of pragmatic balances between these actors and interests. Given the state's vulnerability to organized pressure and the regime's "vote-seeking" nature, it will most likely surrender to the demand of groups favorable to illegal migration such as employers in labor-intensive sectors, and dismiss hostile voices to migrants if they are not sufficiently loud and organized. (Freeman, 1994) However, balancing contrasting interests is not always an easy task, which can explain the resort to contradictory solutions resulting in the "discursive gap".

Conversely, rather than considering the state as an infallible political entity, state's failure approaches focus on states' inability to control migration either because of inherent limitations in developing effective mechanisms, which challenges the myth of the Westphalian omnipotent state, or due to external constraints related to globalization and people-smuggling transnational networks.

Effective control on illegal migration –as well as other issues- is unevenly distributed among state, which is sometimes attributed to the differences between state formation processes and to the nature of political systems, producing different effects on migration control. One might argue that democracies are less able to impose tough restrictions on migration for humanitarian considerations, but also because of the binding effect of democracy on decision makers. Yet, Gracias-Mascarenas assumed that controlling human mobility might be challenging for authoritarian states as well. (Echeverria, 2020, p. 47)

Other explanations shed light on problems related to an inherent lack of knowledge, which undermines states' predictive and -therefore- administrative capabilities, and budgetary constraints that jeopardize the implementation process. (Echeverria, 2020, p. 48)

Consequently, according to state's failure approaches, migration is to be considered as an inevitable by-product of large-scale human mobility that

states cannot get rid of no matter how hard they try.

However, Gabriel Echeverria contested these explanations as they overlooked other factors like the possible conflict a migration policy might face with other public policies, and other spatiotemporal peculiarities that explain why the same migration policy may work in some cases in certain historical moments and may not in some others. (Echeverria, 2020, p. 48)

On the other hand, some scholars pointed out exogenous factors that influence states' ability to effectively control illegal migration. Admittedly, the impact of globalization on states' capabilities has extensively been addressed by both pluralists and state-centrists.

Undeniably, the global market has become more and more integrated resulting in the decline of the power of national governments especially in the economic field. The demand and the supply are being defined globally rather than locally, which makes the free movement of labor –as a means of production- independent from states' will. Nonetheless, states seem more reluctant to accept the free flow of workers than the free movement of other means of production. (Echeverria, 2020, p. 50)

From a political perspective, the post-Cold War era has brought about a particular understanding of human rights that constrained states' authority, compelling them to international agreements and treaties that aim to protect migrants' rights.

As can be seen in table 1, mono-factorial explanations have dominated migration studies. However, they are not uncontested and each of them has been subject to critics. One might argue that these explanations can be synthetized into an inclusive multi-factorial approach, but, as pointed out by Gabriel Echeverria, many of them are antagonistic, and therefore incompatible. (Echeverria, 2020, p. 75)

Table 1. Mono-causal explanations of illegal migration

Explanation logic: illegal migration as the result of...				counterarguments
State choice	Internal political	Sovereignty imperatives	State strategy to build its	Illegal migrants are not completely excluded.

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	factors		legitimacy and maintain sovereignty	Sometimes they find it convenient to be illegal.
		Governmentality techniques	State strategy to control population	No differentiation.
		State self-restraint and right-based liberalism	State self-constrained capacity to control population	Illegal migration also exists in authoritarian states
				Illegal migration could be useful to states.
	The state and social demands	The state and capital	States produce illegal migrants to fulfil the demand of the labor market	States are not omnipotent
				Why do some states regularize?
				No differentiation
		The state as a broker between different social demands	Illegal migration as a pragmatic solution	States' own interests downplayed
			Controls as symbolic policies	States' capacities and rationality overstated
	State failure	Inherent limitations and weaknesses of states	Policy design	Knowledge production, policy design, predictive capacity limitations
			Policy implementation	Administrative, organizational and financial limitations
		External constraints and	Economic globalization	The overwhelming force of the
				States have favored globalization and its dynamics. Illegal

	limitations		global economy	migration is not a sign of their decline but of their choices.
		Political globalization	The role of: embedded liberalism; international legal and human rights' regimes; international institutions	States have the power to control; if they do not, this indicates possible collusions and self interests.
		Social globalization	Communications and transport technologies; information exchanges and cultural unification; transnational networks	Why do some countries control better than others?
		Migration industry	The activity of informal and criminal networks; human smuggling and human trafficking	Why differences between states?
				Why the variation in the dynamics over time?
	Internal constraints and limitations	The informal economy	Informal employment in many production sectors	The state do not want to control the informal economy
				No lineal relation informal economy-irregulation, the US case.
				Informal economy before illegal migration.
		Migrants'	Individual	Risk of overstating

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		agency	strategies and counterstrategies to circumvent controls	migrants' power and downplaying the role of structures. Why aspirations change?
		Internal social constraints	Street-level bureaucrats and other agents' discretionality	Policies are often effective.
			The role of civil society	Differences between countries
			Migration industry (internal)	

Source: Echeverria, 2020, pp. 76-77

As for migrants' motivations to illegally enter a state, many explanations are evoked, among which "rational-choice theories".

In a globalized world, some scholars such as Bommess and Sciortino suggest that illegal migration reflects world society's structural contradictions. (Bommess & Sciortino, 2011, p. 215) On the one hand, developed countries offer opportunities that attract them. On the other hand, the state-system limits access to these states through different apparatus. The opportunities to enter these areas legally are therefore relatively scarce. Consequently, migrants are confronted by two contradictory communications, and when it comes to choose between the "come" and the "don't come", turning a blind eye to the existing restrictions becomes an inevitable choice.

Regardless of the migrants' decision-making process, a distinction is usually made between migrants and refugees. While migration is generally motivated by economic and social reasons, refugees leave their homelands for different compelling political, ecological and security reasons. (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 171)

As stated above, the COVID-19-related travel measures were not

primarily intended to contain illegal migration. Consequently, one cannot evaluate their efficiency in controlling this phenomenon. However, the impact of international travel restrictions on illegal migration flows can be explored as a by-product of the virus containment policies.

In an attempt to investigate the impact of the coronavirus on global mobility in 2020, Meghan Benton & al divided the cross-border mobility into three phases (Benton, Batalova, Davidoff-Gore, & Schmidt, 2021, pp. 1-2):

1. Mobility lockdowns (January to May 2020): which was the most restrictive phase. Many countries imposed national and international travel restrictions. Governments issued roughly 43300 travel measures and at least 70 travel bans.

2. Phased reopening (June to September 2020): in order to mitigate the economic disastrous consequences of the first phase, many countries replaced bans on travelers by health measures, including certificates of pre-departure COVID-19 tests, quarantine measures or health declaration forms.

3. Responses to new outbreaks and virus mutation (October to December 2020): which was a mixed picture phase. Some countries continued to rely on health measures instead of travel controls, some others resorted to route restrictions. A few countries opened even to tourists.

3. Illegal migration trends in the European Union:

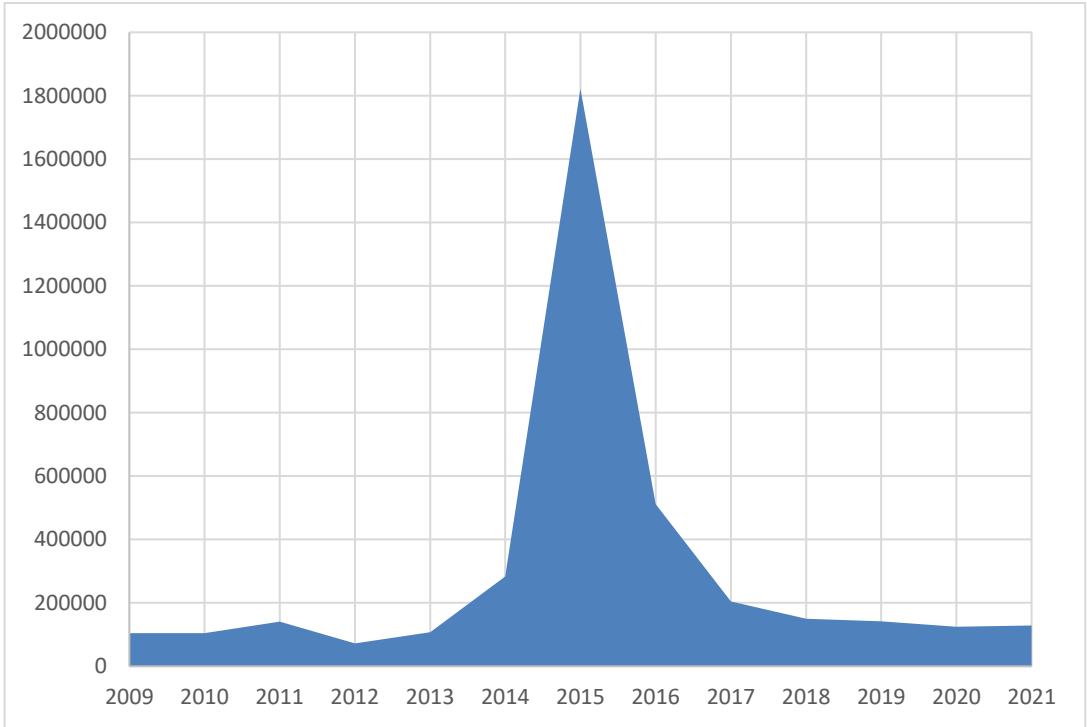
Figure 1 reveals that the number of illegal migrants entering the EU remained the same in 2009 and 2010, followed by a slight increase in 2011. 2012 has witnessed an unprecedented decrease from 141050 to 72440. Starting from 2013, the numbers show a steady increase that reached the pic in 2015, during the so-called 2015 European migrant crisis when the European continent saw the biggest migratory wave since WW2. Unsurprisingly, by 2016 –following the EU-Turkey Statement- migrants flow dropped to 511050 and then continued to decline in the subsequent years. 2021 is however marked by a slight increase from 125230 in 2020 to 129113.

As can be seen from figure -1- , the number of illegal border-crossings after the outbreak of the pandemic has actually decreased. However, there is no

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evidence showing a correlation between the number of illegal migrants entering the EU and the COVID-19 pandemic, given that the number of illegal border-crossings was already in decline since 2016.

Fig.1. Illegal border-crossings in the EU 2009-2021

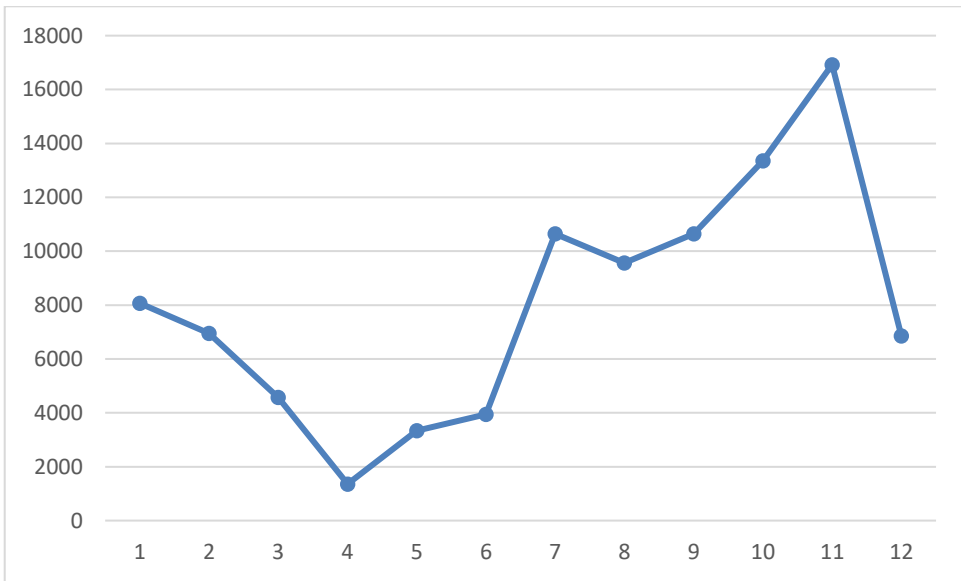


Source: <https://frontex.europa.eu>

On a monthly basis, the evidence is stronger. As suggested by figure -2-, the number of illegal border-crossings has fallen dramatically in April 2020, i.e. 4 months after the identification of the first COVID-19 case and less than one month since the WHO declared it a pandemic, which suggests that the COVID-19 acted as a major short-term disrupter to illegal migrants. This can be explained by the mobility lockdowns during the early phase of the pandemic, when many EU countries completely closed their borders, as can

be seen in map -1-. Consistently with our findings, Benton & al considered the first phase extending from January to May 2020 the most restrictive in terms of International travel. (Benton, Batalova, Davidoff-Gore, & Schmidt, 2021, pp. 1-2)

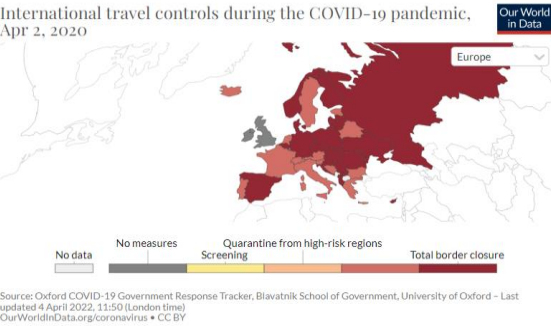
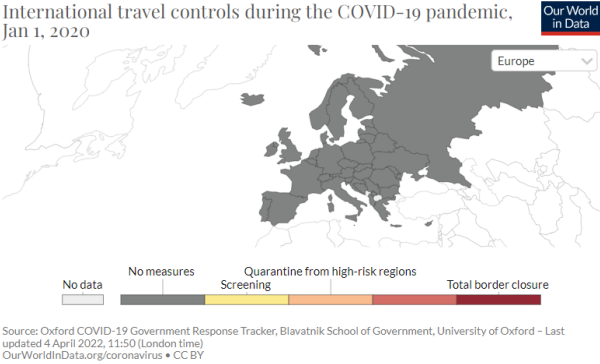
Fig.2. Monthly illegal border-crossings in the EU in 2020



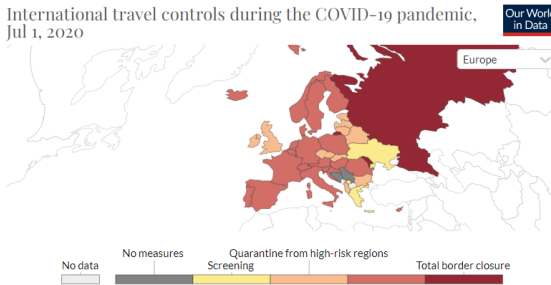
Source: <https://frontex.europa.eu>

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Map.1. International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020

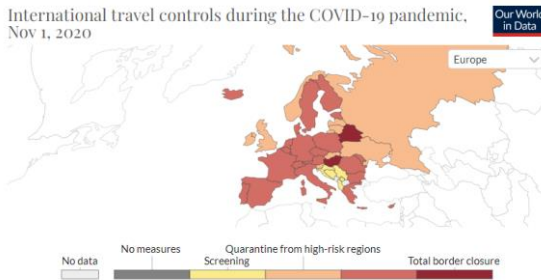


International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic,
Jul 1, 2020



Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford - Last updated 4 April 2022, 11:50 (London time)
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International travel controls during the COVID-19 pandemic,
Nov 1, 2020



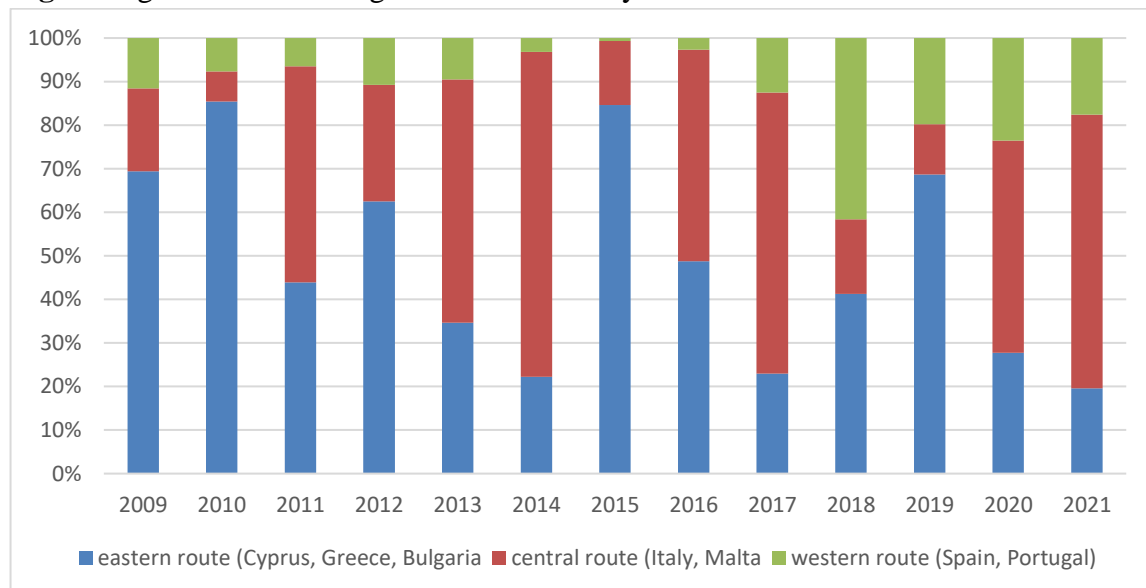
Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford - Last updated 4 April 2022, 11:50 (London time)
OurWorldinData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government response Tracker.

However, illegal migration flows are not evenly fluctuating. The access to the EU from the Mediterranean Sea is via three main routes, namely the Western, the Central and the Eastern route. As can be seen from figure -3-, the Eastern and the Central routes continued to be the main entry path into the EU, with the notable exception of 2018, when illegal migrants transiting from the Western route represented 42% of the total number of illegal border-crossings.

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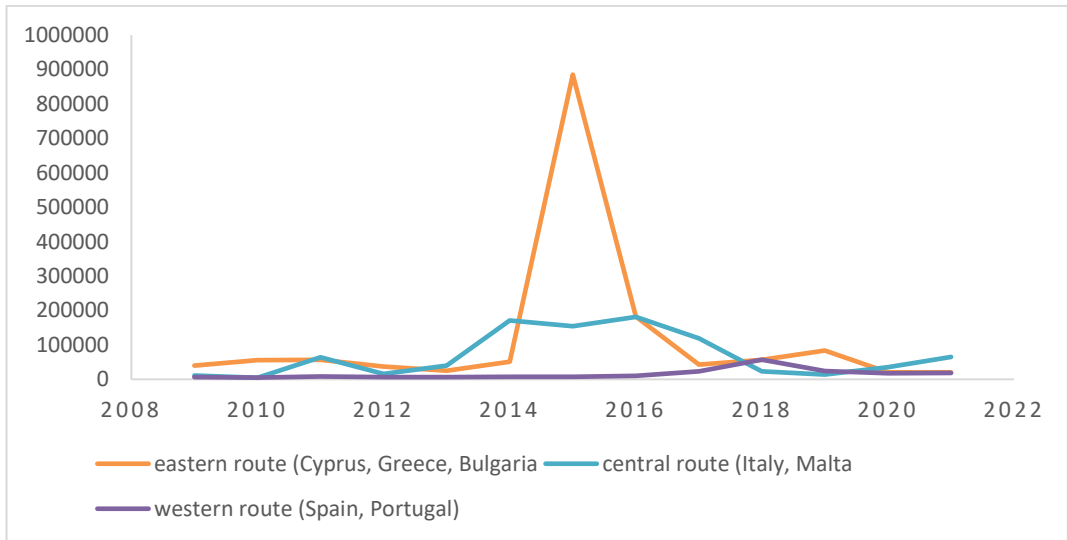
Fig.4. Illegal border-crossings rates in the EU by route 2009-2021



Source: <https://frontex.europa.eu>

Figure -4- illustrates the differences in the numbers of illegal entries between these three main roads. A noteworthy difference is noticed on the Western route where the chart followed a completely different pattern. The number of illegal border-crossings via the Western route remained relatively low and stable up to 2017 reaching the peak in 2018. The number started decreasing in 2019, then slightly increased in 2021. However, the number remained higher than the pre-2017 period, both before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Conversely, illegal migrant transits from the Central route dramatically decreased from 118962 in 2017 to 23485 in 2018. Surprisingly, the number of illegal border-crossings on the Central route during the post-COVID-19 period has doubled. As for the Eastern route, consistently with the European global trend, the number reached the peak during the 2015 European migrant crisis, then declined in 2016 and 2017. Starting from 2018 up to 2019, the number increased, then dropped again in 2020. The outbreak of the pandemic is thus correlated with a decrease in illegal migration on the Eastern route.

Fig.5. Illegal border-crossings in the EU by route 2009-2021

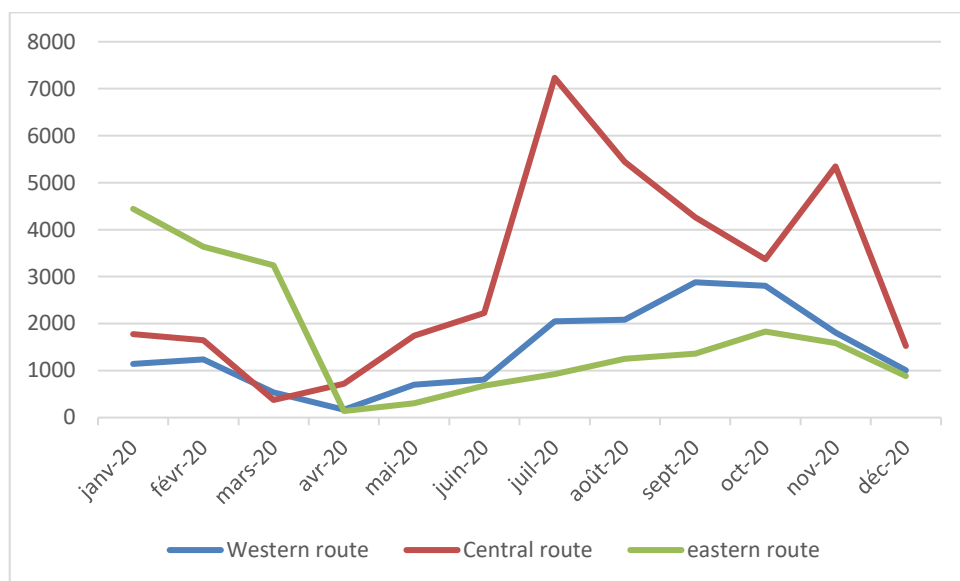


Source: <https://frontex.europa.eu>

Similarly to the global trend, monthly data on illegal border-crossings by route is more representative of the direct impact of international travel restrictions on illegal migration. On the Western route, the number dramatically declined in March and April. On the Central route, illegal border-crossings dropped from 1649 in February to 375 in March, then doubled in April. The evidence is more significant on the Eastern route where the number considerably decreased from 3238 in March to 139 in April. From that point forward, the Central and the Western route –to a lesser extent– became the main access to the EU in 2020. (figure -5-)

Fig.6. Monthly illegal border-crossings in the EU by route in 2020

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Source: <https://frontex.europa.eu>

4. CONCLUSION

Previous scholarships tried to investigate the factors influencing illegal migration flows, either from the perspective of hosting-states or through the lens of migrants. Some recent studies have also explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international mobility. What these works have missed, or been unable to operationalize is the effect of COVID-related restrictions on illegal migration. Even though travel restrictions were not intended to reduce illegal migration flows, we found that the most restrictive period in terms of international travel controls was correlated with a decline in the number of monthly illegal border-crossings in the EU, especially on the Eastern Mediterranean route. On a yearly basis, we found no significant difference between the pre-outbreak and the post-outbreak period. The number of illegal border-crossings was already in decline since 2016. Even more so, the number of illegal border-crossings on the Central Mediterranean route during the post-COVID-19 period has doubled. Consequently, the pandemic had only short-term implications on illegal migration.

Life under the pandemic has certainly been characterized by an unprecedented degree of uncertainty. However, as argued by Gabriella Sanchez and Luigi Achilli, this sentiment is a condition long experienced by both illegal migrants and smugglers, even though the main source of uncertainty derives from migration enforcement measures, which were certainly reinforced as a response to the pandemic (Sanchez & Achilli, 2020, p. 3). Another reason that can explain our findings, is that the factors leading people to migrate clandestinely remained unaffected, and maybe even exacerbated by the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus. Consistently with Sanchez and Achilli's prospects, illegal migration has been temporarily impacted by the COVID-19, but the illegal migration network continually adapted to the restrictions.

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