

Published: 12 May 2015

Region: Europe

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European media outlets portrayed the [death of hundreds of migrants](#) in April as a [great shock to Europe](#), as if the European Union were not aware of the issues concerning the highly dangerous journey undertaken by hundreds of refugees every day.

Mainstream media covered the story very much like a devastating natural disaster by describing the incident as a [‘tragedy’](#) and a [‘refugee drama’](#), a choice of language that reflects the supposed helplessness of benevolent Europe concerning the circumstances under which migrants are forced to travel to find refuge in ‘fortress Europe’.

Instead of reporting on Europe’s strict border policies that function as a bulwark to keep migrants out and ultimately force them to risk their lives during dangerous boat travels, [media decided to identify greedy traffickers as the ‘root’ of the problem](#)

and completely dislocate responsibility from the European narrative. Accordingly, it was the debate on how to prevent traffickers from 'taking advantage' of 'desperate' migrants and thoughts on how to stop migrants from getting on the boats in the first place that dominated the European discourse on immigration, while there was no word on EU immigration policy reforms to facilitate access to the EU for those in need.

'How can we stop migrants from getting on these boats?' asked German newspaper [Spiegel](#). The article explored strategies to successfully strike against the trafficking business and keep migrants in their home country, without even considering the option of easing migration to Europe or deal with socio-economic issues in the countries of origin.

The polemic vilification of human traffickers diverted the attention from structural socio-economic inequalities between the Global North and the Global South and instead gave space to simplistic statements from EU leaders, such as [François Hollande referring to traffickers as 'terrorists'](#) or [Matteo Renzi's remark on the human trafficking of migrants](#) as 'a plague in our continent - the slavery of the 21st Century'.

This construction of villainous traffickers served to create an enemy image that does not appear controversial or problematic at first glance, for migrants were not directly blamed for their death, but rather viewed as 'desperate' individuals being taken advantage of by cruel criminals. This way, mainstream media managed to reject European responsibility and in fact justify [strengthening border patrol](#)

. At the same time, the image of a benevolent EU concerned for the safety of less fortunate people at the gates of Europe was preserved, blinding out the fact that 'a war against human traffickers' translates into 'a war against migrants', even further decreasing migrants' chances to reach Europe.

Since the incident, European mainstream media are continuously busy polishing up the damaged image of the European border patrol by portraying staff as selfless saviours working ceaselessly to provide humanitarian aid to migrants and misconstruing the actual purpose of guarding Europe's coasts, namely blocking the influx of migrants.

[Dailymail](#) published an article that systematically uses photos of border patrol staff searching for survivors in the sea and providing assistance to women and children to make them be seen as caretakers rather than guards keeping 'foreigners' out.

Furthermore, the European media landscape is being flooded with success stories of ‘migrant rescue missions’ of the EU. German news outlet [Tagesschau](#) recently published an article saying that over 6,000 migrants have been saved in the Mediterranean, not least because Germany sent two ships to support the ‘rescue mission’. Other major European media outlets, such as [BBC](#) and [Internazionale](#) [e](#) also report on the success of the Italian coastguard in saving a great number of migrants.

Meanwhile, the [EU appeals to the UN for the authorisation of a military action to destroy the boats](#) and cut off the smuggling network, thereby blocking the influx of migrants to Europe’s coast.

While many media outlets continue to provide an uncritical stage for this ‘war on smugglers’, [The Conversation](#) publishes an article criticising this approach: ‘[T]here is much to be said for focusing on the root causes of migration rather than on the smuggling rings that bring people across the seas. But the EU has long pushed back against serious attention being paid to why individuals risk their lives to irregularly migrate, preferring to focus on migration as a security issue’.

Mainstream reporting on Europe’s ‘migrant crisis’ remains superficial, polemic, and distorted. While the coverage feeds into fears of overwhelming waves of migrants towards Europe, it reproduces a romanticised image of humanitarian EU coastguards and demonises smuggling networks, swiftly disregarding socio-economic and political [push-factors that the EU is co-responsible for](#).