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**Title** – Children’s mobility across the EU governance of unauthorized migration as a game of *chutes* and *ladders*. Evidences from Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium

**Abstract** – Today’s governance of migration into Europe structures through a multiplicity of tangible and intangible boundaries which operate on unwanted foreigners both within and without the territory of the EU. This paper deconstructs this complex governance system by comparing it to the *chutes* and *ladders* boardgame. The aim is to expose the complex grid of in/formal strategies used to govern unauthorized migration by showing how they impact migrants’ trajectories across space and time. Empirically, we discuss the results of a multi-methods, multi-sited, cross-country longitudinal study combining five interlinked investigations in four different countries – Libya, Greece, Italy and Belgium. Over a period of over three years, about 300 Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) were approached in formal and informal reception and detention facilities. Through interviews and questionnaires, at multiple points in time they were asked about their trajectories and the numerous interactions they had with policy tools designed to manage their (im)mobility inside and outside of Europe. In unfolding the narratives of these difficult journeys, we show how a series of non-/institutional actors function as *chutes* or *ladders* which alternatively hinder or facilitate URMs’ “onwards” mobility. As we show, facing these recurrent violations of their most fundamental rights, URMs can rely anyway on a variety of tactics to (try to) keep moving along their fragmented and multidirectional migratory trajectories.

In recent years, scholars have exposed the fragmented and multidirectional nature of so-called “irregular migration” (Kaytaz 2016; Robertson 2021). Complex and non-linear migratory trajectories result from the fact that migration is planned *en route*, and in response to increasingly restrictive migration governance systems (Godin and Donà 2021). This chapter contributes to this scholarship by concentrating on the trajectories of about 300 Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) migrating in(to) Europe. For this purpose, we discuss URMs’ frequent interactions with non-/institutional actors involved in the governance of migration inside and outside of Europe – in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium.

To untangle URMs’ interactions with individuals who are actively engaged in halting or facilitating migration we use the metaphor of the *chutes* and *ladders* boardgame. Through this lens we expose how in dealing with these agents, URMs often have to halt, slow down, divert or reverse their planned migration - *chutes*. Yet, we concurrently show how by interacting with the same and other actors, URMs can succeed also moving somehow “forwards” and faster along their journeys - *ladders*. Our overarching analytical scope is to discuss how the precariousness and vulnerability that migration policies inflict on migrants inform URMs’ everyday tactics, to expose how URMs make sense of and act against the complex grid of (many) risks and (few) opportunities they encounter along their trajectories.

The core research question addressed in this work is thus how and to what extent does the EU governance of migration impact URMs’ migratory tactics outside and inside of Europe? By answering this question, we shed light on the operations of a variety of individuals whose decisions can stop, slow down, divert and reverse migration, or alternatively accelerate it – the *chutes* and *ladders*. What more, by discussing URMs’ interactions with these agents of Europe’s governance of migration, we bring to the surface young migrants’ awareness of the ‘rules of the game’ (Belloni 2016: 52) and their ability to circumvent obstacles and exploit opportunities they encounter on their way (in)to Europe.

Here, we purposely concentrate on individuals who play an active (and often ambivalent) role in controlling and/or facilitate “irregular migration”. We draw from the concept of migration industry (Andersson 2014; Schapendonk 2018) to keep a holistic view on the ‘complex web of relations [among] all sorts of migration facilitators and migration controllers [which allows to better] understand the evolvement of migrant trajectories’ (Schapendonk 2018: 665).

The chapter starts with a brief discussion of the research project from where this work generated. Next, we offer a literature review on core academic debates concerned with minors’ mobility (in)to the EU. It is here where we also justify our choice of using the metaphor of the popular boardgame. Thus, we move to the analysis of data and outline the *chutes* and *ladders* of Europe’s governance of “irregular migration”. In the concluding section we discuss URMs’ tactics to navigate the board.

## A COMPLEX, MULTI-SITED AND LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF URMs’ PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING ON THE MOVE

The data discussed in this chapter generated within the European Research Council funded project ChildMove, a study of the longitudinal evolutions in the psychosocial wellbeing of URMs in relation to pre, peri and post migration experiences. In practice, a research team approached about 300 URMs over five different fieldworks: one in Belgium, two in Italy, one in Greece and one in Libya. On the ground, researchers collected questionnaires, structured and semi-structured interviews, and conducted participant observations.

In Libya, we conducted a cross-sectional study between April and July 2018 in four detention centers located in and around Tripoli. 99 URMs were approached in facilities managed by the Government of National Accord (GNA) on behalf of the EU. Access to these centers was possible after obtaining the official permission from the GNA and thanks to the support of the EU delegation in Libya.

Concerning Europe, data generated from three longitudinal studies developed between 2017 and 2021. In Italy, data were gathered in multiple locations including formal and informal reception facilities in Palermo, Rome and Ventimiglia, as well as shelters for victims of human trafficking and sexual violence in Catania and Piedmont. As for Belgium and Greece, researchers collected data mainly

in formal and informal reception (and detention) facilities – including hotspots. Importantly, researchers collected data over three different moments in time to follow developments in URM's journeys and their psychological wellbeing.

All measurement moments included semi-structured interviews and self-reported questionnaires about demographic background, the journey, current living status, stressful life events and overall wellbeing. While questionnaires were translated in multiple languages, for the interviews researchers often relied on the support of interpreters.

## THE MIGRATION OF (UNACCOMPANIED) MINORS: KEY THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND DEVELOPMENTS

Since migration started being treated as a major security issue, authorities introduced complex policy frameworks to target “irregular” migrants inside as well outside of Europe. For instance, from almost three decades neighboring countries such as Morocco or Libya are increasingly involved in controlling unauthorized migration on behalf of the EU. Likewise, surveillance capabilities at the external frontiers of the EU were also significantly enhanced, while control on undocumented migrants already present within Europe increased. As a result, migrating (in)to Europe undocumented became a much riskier task (Orsini 2018). Today, so-called “irregular migrants” experience increased precariousness and vulnerability, since their (in)ability to reach the EU and move freely within depend on the interactions with a constellation of non-/institutional actors in-/directly involved in governing migration (De Giorgi 2010; Anderson 2010). While these transformations concern primarily adult migrants, they also impact minors on the move – even more since “the numbers of unaccompanied migrant minors [...] entering the EU [doubled between] 2013 [and] 2014 [and] then [quadrupled] by 2015” (Menjívar and Perreira 2019, 198). This, even though minors - and especially URM's (Iusmen 2020) - are subject to specific protection systems (Hernández Senovilla 2014).

Since *securitarian* concerns relative to migration prevail on more humanitarian logics (Orsini et al. 2021), today also the migration of unwanted migrant minors is frequently governed through the (re)production of precariousness (Heidbrink 2021). “Precarity is becoming increasingly common in discussions of [migrant minors.] A politically-induced precariousness [...] which results in [...] real or symbolic violence [...] and a failure to afford adequate protections” (Di Rosa and Kallinikaki 2021, 3). Since their condition turns increasingly precarious young migrants become more vulnerable (Heidbrink 2021). Children on the move are particularly exposed to risks in key transitory stages such as for instance at the border (Bhabha 2019) or when entering/leaving formal and informal reception facilities (Menjívar and Perreira 2019). In these “borderzones” (Topak 2020) URM's are frequently forced to remain “invisible” to escape dangerous situations while attempting to progress in their migratory projects.

It is important to stress that, for long, children traveling alone remained largely ignored by international migration regimes (Gardner 2012). Their independent and autonomous mobility has often been framed as somehow “out of place” (Bhabha 2001) and risky. Such perspective was mirrored in the academic literature which tended to consider young migrants as dependents within family units. Yet, more recent research recognizes the active involvement of minors in building their migratory projects, and the multi-layered reasons that lead their migration (White et al. 2011, Ni Laoire, White, and Skelton 2017).

In fact, the ‘focus on vulnerability [...] ignores that children make decisions and that those decisions are influenced by a variety of factors and relationships’ (Heidbrink 2021, 997). URM's vulnerable status does not necessarily imply that they are stripped of their agency: emphasizing the precariousness imposed on minors can also serve to highlight how children can skillfully play on contradictory categorizations to negotiate the continuation of their mobility (Lems, Oester and Strasser 2020). Increased migration controls encourage minors to take greater risks during the journey, but also to forfeit their agency at opportune moments (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016).

The cumulated experiences of irregularity and deportation often strengthen children's ability to cope with the *undocumentedness* (Lønning 2020). Accordingly, young migrants might skilfully disclose

or conceal their minors' identity and status depending on their migratory priorities (Lønning 2020). They could choose to go "under the radar" by absconding from care facilities, to escape from the bureaucratic categorisations of protective services (Humphris and Sigona 2019). To avoid immobility in border areas, minors often hide their real nationality and pass as adults to avoid the threat of, for instance, deportation (Lønning, 2020).

The metaphor of the *chutes* and *ladders* boardgame helps disentangling the complex interplay between *a)* policy-driven constraints and opportunities in URM's "irregular migration", *b)* the precariousness and consequent vulnerability these policies (re)produce on migrants, and, *c)* URM's strategies for building their migratory trajectories anyway. Wee et al. (2018) used the analogy of the popular game to discuss the recruiting strategies of Singapore and Indonesian employment agents in placing migrant workers, and migrants' tactics to deal with them. For them, the *chutes* and *ladders* model allows examining altogether,

state-imposed conditions; the capacity of actors to meet formal and informal conditions; and the multiple ways that conditions are maintained or challenged at various levels. [It shows] how varying degrees of precarity are actively produced by and grappled with by actors across a game board structured, as all games are, by rules, regulations, and laws. (Wee et al. 2019, pp. 2676-7)

Goldring and Landolt (2013) also described foreigners' complicated access to Canadian citizenship as a game of *chutes* and *ladders*: something analogous to what done by Binetti Armstrong (2020) for discussing the Sisyphean experience of accessing asylum in Hungary. The allegory of the *chutes* and *ladders* game helps explaining the non-linearity of URM's migratory trajectories consequent to minors' in-/ability to circumvent the many obstacles (*chutes*) and exploit the few short-cuts (*ladders*) they find along their journeys.

#### THE CHUTES AND LADDERS OF URM'S MIGRATION (IN)TO EUROPE

In the *chutes* and *ladders* boardgame "players move counters along a series of squares according to throws of a dice. A *ladder* provides a short cut to a square nearer the finish and a [*chute*] obliges a player to return to a square nearer the start"<sup>1</sup>. Alternatively, ending on a *ladder* allows respectively for one or more extra throws of dice. On the contrary, finding yourself on a *chute* can also mean to have to stop there for one or more turns. Accordingly, the direction, length and speed of the mobility across the board depends on the dice rolls and whether one ends on the "right" or the "wrong" square. Succeeding in reaching the end of the path thus depends on matching a series of conditions which players can only hardly control. This suggests that the chanciness deriving from URM's precariousness, with its "sense of ontological unpredictability" (Wee et al. 2019, 2672) totally shapes URM's migratory trajectories and their experiences of the journey.

Yet, as we illustrate, *vis a vis* the randomness of the encounters with several institutional and non-institutional actors involved in governing "irregular migration", URM's remain anyway able to negotiate their spatial and temporal mobility over the board (Goldring and Landolt 2013). Young migrants learn how to make their way through the board by exploiting *ladders*, or by (trying to) avoiding and circumvent *chutes*.

For building our *chutes* and *ladders* model, we concentrate on actors whose involvement in the governance of migration impact young migrants' mobility. This includes institutional and non-institutional operators who, in one form or the other, actively engage in the day-to-day management of "irregular migration". In practice, we focus on specific points of rupture in migrants' journeys - namely at and across international borders and inside and around formal and informal reception/detention facilities, camps and shelters - as "borderzones" (Topak 2020) where migrants' interactions with Europe's governance of migration are more visible and relevant.

There, we consider all those who 'actively engaged in halting, control or facilitate' migration - i.e., the migration industry (Andersson 2014, pp. 15-16). That is, border and coast guards or, more broadly, law enforcement officials and the personnel working in reception/detention facilities. Next to these

figures whose engagement within the EU governance of “irregular migration” is somehow formalized also in terms of, for instance, official employment, we focus also on more informal actors such as smugglers and traffickers. Together with other actors which we have no space to discuss here – e.g., the members of civil society and international organizations, guardians or volunteers - all these different non-/institutional agents contribute in slowing down, speeding up, diverting or halting migration: importantly, in the eyes of URM, they all ‘appear [...] as similar actors’ (Schapendonk 2018, p. 664).

To facilitate our presentation, we discuss these different *chutes* and/or *ladders* separately, as if their impact on URM’s mobility could be clearly distinguished. However, in reality, the operation of each *chute/ladder* is very much interconnected, as for the effects they produce on the temporal and spatial mobility of young migrants. More importantly, in listing these different actors of Europe’s governance of migration consecutively, we also provide a sense of some sort of linearity in how URM interact with them. However, young migrants do not encounter these obstacles and short cuts as if they were placed one after the other along linear migratory trajectories. On the contrary, minors go through the same *chutes* and *ladders* repeatedly, as they move in multiple directions.

### **Law Enforcement Officials**

URM’s journeys often start several borders away from Europe. When caught by authorities across or in the vicinity of a frontier, our participants were often forced to halt or revert their migration. ‘After Mali we wanted to move to Algeria. [But] when we arrived to Algeria [authorities at the border] told us that we couldn’t enter [because] we didn’t have documents’<sup>2</sup>.

More than half of the URM we approached in Libya had tried the crossing of the Sicilian Channel. ‘I paid money again [...] then I got in the sea. [...] We spent eight hours [at sea and until] we were caught by the police [i.e., the Coastguard] and were taken here’ - i.e., to the detention center. Something very similar applies also on the other side of the external frontier of the EU, where European law enforcement officials operate.

We tried a lot to cross the border of Bulgaria. [...] One time we crossed and in Bulgaria they caught [us] in the forest. [...] The police caught [us and] they took us back to Turkey border and just said to cross it. [Then] we tried a lot to cross the border [with Croatia] but always when we were trying, they were catching us.

The port of Igoumenitsa is a sort of “gateway” for undocumented migrants present in Greece to (try to) reach the rest of the EU via the sea. To attempt these crossings, migrants hide in the vicinity of the local port to try getting onboard of one of the many ferries leaving daily for Italy (Scalettaris, Monsutti and Donini 2021). ‘In Igoumenitsa, the coastguard caught us for one night in the port, with our money they bought us a ticket and they returned us the next day in Patras,’ 300 kilometers south – i.e., lateral mobility.

However, interacting with law enforcement officials at the border can also lead to (a faster) onward mobility. In war-torn Libya it is complicate to draw a line between smugglers or traffickers, and police forces – as confirmed in this account of the crossing of the Libyan-Sudanese border.

After the car accident [...] the police took us [...] all the gold and the money. [...] After this they call another smuggler. I think there was an agreement with the police and the Sudanese human traffickers to free us and to share the money. After the call by the police the drivers of the pickup came back to take us. The police let them leave with us so I believed they had an agreement with the human traffickers.

As for international border, “irregular migrants” - including URM – interact frequently with law enforcement officials also in formal reception/detention facilities, and makeshift camps. In Libya, all

the research participants were detained in official centers under the custody of the Libyan police forces – being thus stuck with respect to both their temporal and spatial mobilities.

Yet, dealing with police forces in these centers and camps does not just translate into URM's immobility: it can lead also to backwards mobility.

I was in a center for minors [in the Netherlands] then I was transferred in a shelter for adults because I was told that I am not a minor. [From there] I was forced to come back to Italy by the Dutch police. Two weeks ago, I was deported to Milano.

Importantly, several police operations target URM's in makeshift camps such as those of Ventimiglia in Italy, and Calais in France. '[We were in Calais] on [our] way to the UK [...] through the sea. [The police] caught [me] and they [made me wait] for 25 days. [I] was in jail for 25 days [in] this house [with] many refugees [...] from different countries.'

Somehow surprisingly, interacting with police forces inside and around reception and detention centers and camps can also accelerate migration. In Libya, police forces operating in detention centers are often those making possible for detainees to (try to) cross the Mediterranean. At times, they operate explicitly as smugglers; other times, they work as intermediaries.

Interestingly, there are also other ways in which police forces can help URM's in proceeding along their planned migratory journey. As narrated by one of our participants, after living for a while in a small Spanish village, together with other URM's he decided to move to France. A first attempt to cross the Spanish-French border failed because they were caught by the French police who returned them to their Spanish colleagues – who took them back to the reception facility they were living in. Yet, due to internal regulations, URM's were not allowed to be hosted there anymore, so that the Spanish police took them back to the station from where they took their bus to France, and left them there.

### **Personnel of Reception/Detention Facilities and Shelters**

Depending on national and European policies, different professional figures work inside official reception and detention facilities – e.g., psychologists, interpreters or legal experts - to perform a variety of tasks. Since URM's occupy a somehow subaltern position with respect to these professionals, these figures become powerful actors whose decisions can impact profoundly young migrants' destinies.

The practice of assigning minors an adult age regardless of their declarations was frequently recorded in our sample. Mistrust concerning the truthfulness of URM's deposition impact the outcome of applications for protection and, thus, the likelihood for these young migrants to get their demands quickly and/or successfully processed. Long and unsuccessful applications slow down the settlement process, or turn it legally impossible.

In general, mistreatment in reception facilities in Belgium, Italy or Greece, and the overall poor living conditions, constituted a main reason for URM's to change their migratory projects and move elsewhere – i.e., lateral mobility. Yet, professionals working in detention or reception centers can also be of support for (speeding up) URM's' onward mobility.

A young francophone boy we interviewed in Italy as he waited to cross into France, told us that an interpreter working in the reception center suggested him to refuse getting his fingerprints recorded as this would have reduced the possibilities for him to move across the Alps to accessed better living conditions and education in French. In fact, he gave him '20€ and suggested [...] to leave the center and Rome.'

### **Smugglers/Traffickers**

There is no doubt that smugglers and/or traffickers make irregular migration possible. They operate as *ladders* allowing undesired migrants – including URM's – to circumvent and cope with the (many) *chutes* they come across along their journeys.

While also due to the minor age of our informants we find it scarcely relevant to distinguish between smugglers and traffickers (Cimino and Mannu 2020), interacting with one or the other typology of actors implies very different experiences of onward mobility. Trafficked people very rarely experience their mobility as an opportunity to move forward in their migratory projects. On the contrary, having access to smugglers is seen as a necessary condition.

In fact, URM's rely on smugglers to cross borders both outside and inside of Europe, or to free themselves from detention facilities. In the words of this young refugee, '[the] smuggler helped. And I went to the open center [where] I spent one month [...] Then we called the smuggler [...] who [did already help us] in Turkey [...] So, he sent another smuggler [and] from there [he took] us to Serbia.'

However, URM's interaction with smugglers and traffickers can also result in immobility, backward and lateral mobility. We collected several testimonies of URM's being kidnapped or forced into detention by smugglers and traffickers in the proximity of key border crossings. Almost the totality of our interviewees spent some time incarcerated in closed warehouses and other facilities.

From [the Libyan city of] Sabratha we kept changing cars. From one small car to [...] another. [...] When we arrived in Sabratha [the smugglers] put us in a small room. [After they took us to the sea the] boat started sinking. [...] They took us back to the same room and started beating us.

While smugglers and traffickers' imposition to hide in secluded facilities is a strategy to make onward mobility possible, these incarcerations were experienced as unexpected stops – i.e., *chutes* – by the totality of our respondents.

What more, while ending in the hands of traffickers is what makes possible a relatively fast onward migration, such emigration results often in the experience of immobility and precarity, or of being forced into some form of lateral mobility.

#### NAVIGATING A GAME OF MANY *CHUTES* AND FEW *LADDERS*

As they move throughout the *chutes* and *ladders* boardgame, URM's change their plans *en route* and deal strategically with the obstacles and opportunities/short cuts they find along the way. For instance, we collected numerous examples of how URM's were able to escape detention in Libya. While they often had to pay guards, other times they simply evaded. Similarly, despite being repeatedly (and illegally) pushed back at Europe's external and internal borders, most URM's kept trying the crossing. Facing the impossibility to move "forward," other simply changed their migratory plans and decided to dwell/settle down elsewhere.

In general, most of the young migrants we interviewed did try to catch up with the "rules of the game" by following the advice they collected from friends, peers and other contacts they found on the way. Based on such at times inaccurate knowledge, when possible, they were able to use opportunities strategically to fulfil their migratory project(s). For instance, being aware of the risk of being mistaken for adult migrants, many URM's tried to avoid getting their fingerprints recorded at the country of entrance – e.g., Italy or Greece – as they knew this would have hindered their ability to move further within Europe. 'In my [first] week [after] I arrived in Rome [...] I was called to get the fingerprint [recorded] and I escaped. [Then] I heard that there is relocation program for minors so I entered the camp [as] I was desiring to go to Germany.'

Several other interviewees declared their false adult age to escape control and move (faster) to another EU country – regardless of the consequent loss of rights and protections. To reach his family and friends in the North of Europe, one young migrant we interviewed in Ventimiglia told us he declared his false adult age at disembarkation in Sicily. As he was taken to the hotspot in Messina, he then decided not to apply for international protection, so that authorities would have left him exit the camp immediately after taking his fingerprint – but with 'a decree of deferred refoulement along with an expulsion order' (Sciurba 2017, 113).

As noted by Schapendonk (2018, p. 664), URM's navigate *chutes* and *ladders* through 'improvisation, creativity and hustling [combined with the ability to] mediate relationships with

relevant actors of the migration industry' – i.e., *chutes* and *ladders*. Importantly, throughout their journeys URMs come to interact and often rely also on a variety of other actors. These include for instance the members of the many NGOs and international organizations that inhabit the “borderzones” we considered for this study (Walters 2010). Yet, our participants told us also that they relied a lot on local communities, guardians, or activists, some of which did provide them with pivotal information and/or material assistance to continue their journeys.

Importantly, a specific and quite central role is performed by URMs' families/circles of friends. Some among us suggested that they are somehow those who roll the dices, in as far as they often support logistically, financially but also emotionally minors' journeys at distance/on the background. These are all actors who, in one form or another, can account as agents of the “migration industry” and whose impact on URMs' mobility could also be untangled through the lens of the *chutes* and *ladders* boardgame. In fact, a cruel game that seems to hardly ultimately stop the migration of those able to survive it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 12th Edition 2014

<sup>2</sup> non-English interviews were translated by the authors

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