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# Externalization through ‘awareness-raising’: the border spectacle of EU migration information campaigns in Niger

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the externalization process of the European Union’s (EU) borders by focusing on one of its least documented aspects: the funding of migration information campaigns (MICs) aiming to deter ‘potential migrants’ from attempting to enter the EU irregularly. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews conducted with the actors involved in these campaigns, it analyses the implementation of 11 EU-funded MICs in Niger in light of the theory of the ‘Border Spectacle’ originally developed by Nicholas De Genova. In doing so, it contributes to enriching the use of this theory by identifying new types of spectators and new figures of the ‘illegalized’ migrant that emerge from the spectacularization of EU border externalization in Niger. First, the performance of migration deterrence through MICs is broken down into two distinct acts targeting different categories of ‘potential migrants’ in the country. Second, the analysis of the discourses conveyed by MICs highlights that they rely on a two-sided narrative of risks and opportunities, which creates a border spectacle of migrant victimization and stigmatization. In conclusion, it is argued that this spectacle conceals the political causes of the risks increasingly faced by sub-Saharan migrants en route to North Africa and Europe, and delegitimizes those who continue to leave in spite of them.

## KEYWORDS

Migration; borders; externalization; EU/European Union; Niger; deterrence; spectacle; campaigns

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## INTRODUCTION

A landlocked country in the Sahel region has received significant media attention in the past few years for acting as the European Union’s (EU) ‘invisible new border’ (Puig, 2019), ‘migration laboratory’ (Howden & Zandonini, 2018) or ‘migration cop’ (Claudet, 2018). All these descriptors refer to Niger, one of the poorest countries in the world, which has officially been put at the forefront of the EU’s ‘Agenda on Migration’ and the ‘Joint Valletta Action Plan’ adopted in 2015. In the span of a few years, the process of externalizing the EU border towards Niger has translated into an ever-increasing number of projects designed to stem irregular migration flows from the country, including the multiplication of ‘migration information campaigns’ (MICs).

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Public information campaigns can be broadly defined as ‘government-directed and sponsored efforts to communicate to the mass public or a segment of the public in order to achieve a policy result’ (Weiss & Tschirhart, 1994, p. 82). These campaigns are usually designed to address a state’s own citizens and shape their perceptions and attitudes regarding risky behaviours concerning areas such as public health or road safety. MICs funded by the EU and its member states in Niger exhibit two distinctive features in this respect. First, they target individuals who have not yet arrived at the EU’s territorial borders, thus addressing third-country nationals who are located in foreign countries. Second, they tend to portray only the negative aspects of migration, as opposed to campaigns designed to encourage the arrival of tourists or foreign workers. Hence, the official vocabulary designating such campaigns as ‘information’ or ‘awareness-raising’ tools understates the objective of deterrence that they actually pursue in migrants’ countries of origin and transit.

Despite the lack of evidence of their effects on migration decision-making, MICs have attracted increased political and financial support across the world over the past two decades (Tjaden & Dunsch, 2020, p. 4). This paper does not aim to assess the potential impact of MICs on their target audience. Rather, it contributes to the growing body of literature devoted to the critical analysis of these campaigns by analysing the content of 11 EU-funded MICs and the discourses of the actors who deployed them in Niger over a two-year period. Building on the theory of ‘border spectacle’ initially developed by De Genova (2002, 2012, 2013), it shows how these campaigns have produced a ‘spectacularization’ of EU border externalization on the ground. In order to achieve this aim, theoretical and empirical approaches are applied between two major sections.

The theoretical section begins with a review of the literature that describes how MICs have been conceptualized in migration and border studies. It shows that MICs are considered to be ‘soft’ tools aimed at preventing irregular migration in a non-coercive way by acting on the perceptions and subjectivities of potential migrants. The historical context of EU border externalization in Niger is then presented to show how the ‘hard’ measures adopted since 2015 – the criminalization of smuggling and the securitization of routes – have considerably increased the risks faced by migrants across the country. Finally, the theoretical framework of ‘border spectacle’ is introduced. This critical approach illuminates how the EU’s externalized border is being ‘enacted’ for potential migrants in Niger, and how the spectacle performed imposes a certain narrative on migration in the country.

The empirical section explores the implementation of MICs as a ‘soft’ tool of EU border externalization in Niger, with the aim of deciphering how these campaigns attempt to reach their target audiences and what kind of discourse they convey. First, the analysis of the actors’ practices and discourses highlights how these campaigns address potential migrants by spectacularising the EU’s externalized border. It points out that this spectacularization takes place in two acts of migration deterrence, which vary according to their audience and staging. Second, the analysis of the content of these campaigns shows that they convey a two-sided narrative about risks and opportunities, which produces a border spectacle of migrant *victimization* and *stigmatization*. In conclusion, it argues that this spectacle acts not only to conceal the political causes of the risks increasingly faced by irregular migrants en route to North Africa and Europe, but also to delegitimize those who continue to leave in spite of them.

Methodologically, this contribution builds on the analysis of 11 MICs funded by the EU and its member states in Niger between January 2017 and December 2018. The term ‘MICs’ is used here to encompass all awareness-raising activities aimed at deterring irregular migration that were identified in that period. While some initiatives were clearly structured as campaigns, others served as specific components of multifaceted ‘migration management’ projects (see Table A1 in the supplemental data online). Primary sources gathered for the analysis include campaigns material (e.g., leaflets, comic books, social media posts) and 25 semi-structured interviews carried out with 19 actors involved in the design or implementation of these campaigns. The collection

of these data took place during two month-long fieldworks conducted in Niamey at the end of 2017 and 2018, although some additional interviews were held later by phone. While conducting and analysing these interviews, constant attention has been paid to any asymmetric power relations or cultural differences that may lead to bias in the results. In an effort to minimize these potential misinterpretations, every analytical claim is illustrated with the original discourse and/or material where possible.

## MICs AS 'SOFT' TOOLS OF BORDER EXTERNALIZATION

Since the early 2000s, the concept of 'border externalization' has been widely used to qualify contemporary border and migration control practices, to the extent that its relevance may sometimes be taken for granted rather than made explicit. It was originally forged by scholars in order to critically assess the practices of 'remote control' or 'policing at a distance' (Guild & Bigo, 2005; Guiraudon, 2003; Zolberg, 2003) which were driven by the establishment of the Schengen Area and the development of a common visa policy in 1990. It was then popularized as a framework to characterize the rapid expansion of the 'external dimension' of EU immigration and asylum policies in the 2000s (Boswell, 2003; Lavenex & Uçarer, 2004). The concept of 'externalization' transposes to the field of geopolitical analysis a term derived from business economics, which defines the recourse to an external supplier to perform a task that a company previously carried out (or could have carried out) internally (Quentin & Motlow, 1998, p. 79). Following the same logic, it describes a strategy developed by destination states to filter and restrict access to their territory by deferring various responsibilities related to the management of their borders 'externally' towards the territories of third countries.

In fewer than 20 years, the growing trend towards externalization in the Global North has profoundly transformed the 'spatial imaginary of borders' (Cobarrubias, 2020), which no longer appear strictly tied to the territorial margins of states. However, the nature and extent of the spatial relocation of state borders remains the object of scholarly debate. Some have argued that externalization strategies have produced a 'stretching' of EU borders beyond the sovereign territory of its member states, as illustrated by the relocation of migration control *dispositifs* to the African continent (Casas et al., 2011). On a wider scale, this process of 'extra-territorialization' has nonetheless been accompanied by the 'hyper-territorialization' of borders and the increased fortification of border lines between states (FitzGerald, 2019). As a result of their shifting spatiality, contemporary borders have been increasingly approached as 'itinerant' apparatus deployed along the ever-changing migratory routes, thereby challenging the correspondence of state sovereignty and territory on which the Westphalian system is based (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015b, 2016; Cobarrubias, 2020).

Today, the concept of border externalization is thus used to refer to a heterogeneous set of practices that are deployed in so-called 'origin' and 'transit' countries to keep unwanted migrants and asylum seekers at a distance from wealthier states. Over the last three decades, one of these practices has notably been the funding of MICs designed to warn prospective candidates against the pitfalls of irregular migration. At the EU level, the first MICs were implemented by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Eastern Europe in the late 1990s, with the official aim of preventing human trafficking in the sex industry (Andrijasevic, 2007; Andrijasevic & Anderson, 2009). Following the externalization of EU borders southwards in the 2000s, the geography of MICs gradually shifted from post-socialist Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa, where their objective of migration prevention became more explicit (European Commission, 2016).

In the literature, these campaigns have been interpreted as new instruments of remote migration control, 'stemming from the shortcomings of traditional border surveillance' (Nieuwenhuys & Pécout, 2007, p. 1691) and aiming 'to inscribe in potential migrants' subjectivities the borders the EU fails to control on the ground' (Heller, 2014, p. 304). Nonetheless, several

scholars have questioned the supposed deterrent effect of MICs, arguing, first, that they were unlikely to be trusted by their target audience (Brachet, 2016; Kosnick, 2014; Oeppen, 2016); second, that knowing the risks did not refrain aspiring migrants from leaving (Alpes, 2014; Hernández-Carretero & Carling, 2012; Mbaye, 2014; van Bommel, 2019); and third, that the messages carried by these campaigns were subverted by the local actors involved in their dissemination (Rodríguez, 2019). Still, the narratives conveyed by these campaigns contribute to the '*moralization*' of migration (Freemantle & Landau, 2020) and establish the Westphalian nation-state system as the ultimate reference to assess the legitimacy of mobilities (Watkins, 2020).

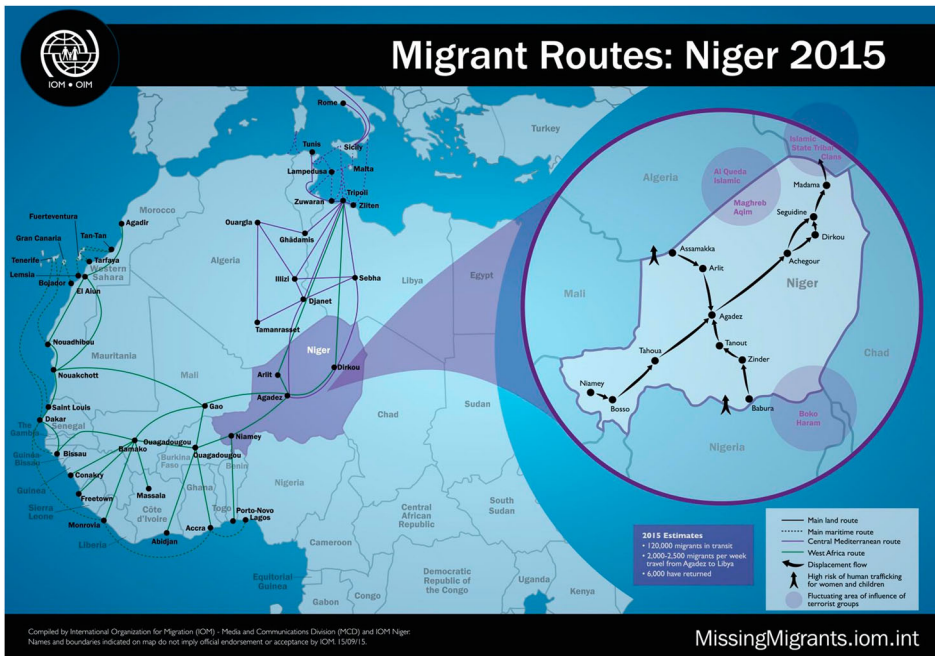
The growing attention to MICs in border and migration studies prompted researchers to include them among the externalization strategies deployed by states from the Global North to preventively restrict access to their territories. According to a taxonomy developed by Kent et al. (2019), migration control policies can be divided into the categories of 'defence' when they address migrants' capabilities to move freely and 'deterrence' when they aim to modify their motivations to do so without physically blocking them. In the same vein, MICs have been referred to as instruments of 'preventive' dissuasion characterized by a low level of control on migrants, as opposed to 'repressive' dissuasion tools such as forced repatriations (López-Sala, 2015). Moreover, the dissuasive effect of MICs has been differentiated from the 'deterrent' effect carried by direct control measures, such as images of deportees disembarking from a plane in their country of origin (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011, p. 56).

Given that border externalization encompasses a range of policies that fall along a continuum of coercion, a consensus has recently emerged that frames MICs as a 'soft' instrument of border externalization. For FitzGerald (2019, p. 6), publicity campaigns represent the 'softest tool of caging techniques' designed to keep potential migrants and refugees out of rich democracies – the hardest one being military intervention. Williams (2020, p. 1203) agrees that MICs epitomize the '*soft power*' side of border enforcement mechanisms, arguing that their goal is to supplement the '*hard power*' strategies of military equipment, surveillance and criminal prosecution. By acting upon migrants' perceptions and subjectivities rather than physically constraining their mobility, MICs therefore highlight the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of border externalization, which have received less scholarly attention to date (Musarò, 2019; Watkins, 2017).

## THE 'HARD' MEASURES OF EU BORDER EXTERNALIZATION IN NIGER

Due to its strategic geographical location between West and North Africa, Niger is an important historical crossroads in the movement of people and goods. The northern Saharan region in particular represents a key crossing point for migrants from the sub-region looking for work in the Maghreb, especially in Libya or Algeria. Yet, since a minority of these migrants began trying to reach the European continent in the early 1990s, the 'porous' borders of Niger became an issue of pressing concern for EU policymakers, who feared that all uncontrolled movement through the Sahara would eventually turn into irregular migration to Europe. According to Brachet (2016, pp. 275–276), it is this fundamental misconception of the dynamics of trans-Saharan migrations that has always remained mainly intra-African, that initially paved the way for the externalization process of EU borders to Niger in the 2000s.

In addition to being a major transit area, Niger is also a country of origin and destination for migration within the African continent. While migrants from the sub-region come to Niger to look for employment opportunities such as the ones provided by gold mines in the north, Nigeriens themselves regularly migrate from rural to urban areas, both inside and outside the country. These temporary patterns of labour or 'circular' migration provide an essential coping mechanism during the dry season, whereby the mobility of young men sustains the 'immobility' of the rest of the household (Boyer, 2013). In parallel, a phenomenon of mainly female migration has increasingly developed from the south-east of Niger to Algeria over the past 20 years (Nabara, 2019).



**Figure 1.** Main migration routes through Niger, 2015.

Note: This map is indicative only and the routes shown may have shifted since it was created.

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM), MissingMigrants.iom.int, 25 November 2015.

In 2011, the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime represented a major turning point in the evolution of EU–Niger relations, as it nullified the 2008 treaty aimed at preventing irregular migration between Libya and Italy. The political chaos that followed this event rapidly led to an upsurge in boat departures from the Libyan coast, which favoured the reactivation of trans-Saharan routes through Niger for migrants from the sub-region. The city of Agadez in particular, which enjoyed an historical status of 'gateway to the desert', became in a few years one of the main 'smuggling hubs' of the African continent, with an estimated 2000–2500 migrants transiting through the city every week in 2015 (Figure 1). It is important to note here that only a small fraction of these migrants were considering Europe, as opposed to Libya and Algeria, to be their final destination; in 2016, it was estimated that around 22.9% of the West African migrants who transited through Agadez arrived in Italy afterwards (Molenaar & El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017, p. 17).

Despite this reality, Niger was subsequently categorized as a transit country by European actors who seized the opportunity to push EU borders further south and tighten their control over trans-Saharan migrations. As shown by Frowd (2020), the production of Niger as a 'transit migration state' was encouraged by local actors who foresaw the symbolic and financial benefits that this political labelling could bring about. For EU actors, this label justified an intervention based on the security logic of 'risk anticipation', which linked uncontrolled migratory flows to transnational threats of terrorism and trafficking in the Sahel (Frowd, 2020, p. 9). Accordingly, EU funding was made available to support the securitization of migration routes across Niger through the multiplication of police checkpoints and border posts equipped with biometric data collection systems (Jegen, 2020, pp. 25–26).

As a response to the growing interest of EU actors in stopping irregular migration flows from and through Niger, national policymakers took up the issue in 2015. The country had



not previously introduced any specific legislation on migration apart from the ‘protocol relating to the free movement of persons’, which was jointly adopted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1979. Due to this protocol, migrants from ECOWAS member states were officially free to circulate in Niger, and those who transported them could do so legally up to the northern borders with Libya and Algeria. In May 2015, however, the Nigerien government promptly passed the law no. 2015-36 related to the ‘illicit trafficking of migrants’. This law criminalized the transport and accommodation of third-country nationals, including from the ECOWAS region, and threatened perpetrators with heavy fines and prison sentences.

The role of EU actors and funding has been crucial in supporting Niger through every stage of the building and implementation of this new legal framework: its influence extended from the ‘technical assistance’ provided for the drafting of the law to the capacity-building of the justice system and the training and equipment of police forces (Boyer & Chappart, 2018). As a result of this criminalization process, the transport of people across the Nigerien desert was turned into a ‘clandestine’ activity overnight, thereby creating the category of ‘smugglers’ that the law was originally supposed to control (Brachet, 2018, pp. 30–31). In the Agadez region, where the revenue associated with migrant transit provided economic opportunities and ensured relative political stability, the enforcement of this law sparked social tensions after leading to a wave of arrests and the confiscation of smugglers’ vehicles (Molenaar, 2017; Raineri, 2018).

Initiated in the 2000s, the externalization of EU borders in Niger gained momentum in the midst of Europe’s ‘migrant crisis’ in 2015. Since then, the legislative and enforcement-based measures undertaken in the country have given rise to a restrictive and repressive migration and border regime that remains unparalleled in the ECOWAS region. Instead of curbing trans-Saharan migration, however, this policy has merely led to the invisibilization of the ‘smuggling’ industry in Niger and the diversion of migration routes towards peripheral areas of the Sahara. Since the security controls carried out under the 2015 law specifically target the wells located on the main tracks across the desert, drivers have started to avoid them in spite of their essential role in ensuring the safety of the journey (Boyer, 2017). As a result, migrants have been subject to higher prices and greater risks, and the number of deaths occurring in the Sahara has risen dramatically (Tubiana et al., 2018, pp. 22–25). Furthermore, between 2016 and 2019, the number of Sub-Saharan migrants stranded in Niger who opted for a ‘voluntary return’ to their country of origin reached 42,604 – one of the highest figures of all IOM missions worldwide (IOM, 2020).

All this clearly indicates that the main effect of the ‘hard’ measures of EU border externalization in Niger (i.e., the criminalization of smuggling and the securitization of migration routes) has been to push migrants into greater distress and precarity than ever before. The human rights abuses and threat of death increasingly faced by individuals attempting to cross the Sahara today are thus the result of deliberate political choices in which the EU is immediately complicit. Nonetheless, this paper intends to show that the violent consequences of this political strategy on the safety and integrity of migrants are actively concealed by one of the ‘soft’ tool of EU border externalization in the country: the extensive funding of MICs.

## THE BORDER SPECTACLE THEORY

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the advancement of the critical literature on MICs by highlighting how their implementation in Niger functions as the spectacularization of EU border externalization intended for an audience of ‘potential migrants’. To do so, it mobilizes the critical concept of ‘border spectacle’ that was initially developed by Nicholas De Genova. Originally, this concept aimed to highlight how the border between the United States and Mexico provided an exemplary theatre for staging, and thus rendering particularly visible, the

spectacle of the 'illegal alien' produced by the law (De Genova, 2002, p. 436). The initial use of the concept thus explicitly referred to the spectacle of border enforcement as a set of material practices taking place at physical borders erected between states. It is through this spectacle happening 'at' the border that 'the law, which has in fact produced the 'illegality' of the migrants in question, is utterly naturalized and vanishes from view' (De Genova, 2012, p. 492).

De Genova's formulation of border enforcement as spectacle directly draws from a theory developed by the Marxist philosopher Debord (1967) in *The Society of the Spectacle*. In this book, Debord describes as a spectacle the hegemonic assemblage of discourses and images that mediate social relations and have been turned into an objective force in modern society (De Genova, 2012, p. 493). The ability of the society of the spectacle to turn a narrow selection of images into the '*epitome of reality*' (Andersson, 2014, p. 153) is what leads De Genova to argue that the spectacle of border enforcement 'fetishizes' migrants' illegality as a natural fact.

The original definition of the border spectacle works through two concomitant lenses. On the one hand, migrants' 'illegality' is reified through the visual and discursive formations that *set the scene* of their exclusion; on the other, this spectacle obscures its *obscene* side: the large-scale recruitment of 'illegalized' migrant labour on a global scale (De Genova, 2012, 2013). Scholars have since taken up De Genova's concept to show that the practices involved in border and immigration enforcement not only set a scene of migrant exclusion, but also may simultaneously produce a spectacle of humanitarianism.

For instance, in his famous ethnography of Euro-African borderlands, Andersson (2014) has brought to light the '*spectacle of the crossing*' performed in two separate acts at the Spanish land and sea borders. The spectacle of migrants' rescue operations at sea in the Canary Islands is addressed to a domestic and international audience; meanwhile, the spectacle of migrants' expulsion at the fenced enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla is addressed to the European paymasters (p. 170). In the same vein, Cuttitta (2014) has described the securitarian and humanitarian aspects of the '*border play*' enacted by migration control policies on the Italian island of Lampedusa, which relies on a two-sided narrative of the border as both 'humane' and 'tough'. He identifies multiple spectators for this performance: Italian voters, the governments of migrants' countries of origin and transit, and the potential migrants themselves (pp. 206–207).

However, as the literature review provided above has shown, contemporary borders have been increasingly externalized beyond the edges of nation-states, and performed through a series of practices that exceed their 'hardest' forms of enforcement (e.g., pushbacks, arrests or deportations). Although De Genova argues that his concept of border spectacle may be most dramatically illustrated in the patrolling and policing of territorial borders, he invites further research that makes use of this critical approach to identify alternative spectacles of migrant 'illegality'. In his own words, he acknowledges that: 'There is nothing about the Border Spectacle that requires its choreography of images to be so literally affiliated to the geography of border enforcement' (De Genova, 2013, p. 1183). Consequently, moving beyond the stagings of migrant repulsion and rescue in border zones, this paper aims to show that the theory of border spectacle can be mobilized to highlight how migrant 'illegality' is rendered visible through the 'soft' tool of border externalization that is deployed within migrants' countries of origin and transit. Using Niger as a case study, the next section both explores how the implementation of EU-funded MICs engenders an original form of border spectacle that is directly addressed at 'potential migrants' and details specific elements of the narrative that is conveyed to them.

## THE SPECTACULARIZATION OF EU BORDER EXTERNALIZATION IN NIGER

The first public campaign about irregular migration implemented in Niger dates to 2006. This campaign was led by the Italian non-governmental organization (NGO) CISP and funded under



the budget line ‘B7-667’ – the first EU budget dedicated to migration cooperation with third countries. Posters under the title ‘The truth’ were put on walls of police stations along the main migratory routes to warn against threats of bandits, aggression, rape, AIDS, hunger, thirst and death in the Sahara (Brachet, 2009, p. 165). A year later, the IOM launched a campaign entitled ‘*CLANDESTINE MIGRATION – Do not bet on certain failure!*’ with a full-page newspaper advert showing a picture of a truck overloaded with people and goods and crossed out by barbed wire (Brachet, 2016, p. 278). Between 2014 and 2016, ‘awareness-raising’ was then integrated into the IOM’s core activities in Niger through the campaign ‘*Supporting Informed Migration Decisions in Niger*’, which was funded jointly by the EU and the Italian Ministry of Interior and the ‘*Agadez Migration Project (AGAMI)*’ funded through the EU’s Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace (Van Dessel, 2019, p. 448).

Since 2016, the growing interest of EU actors in financing MICs in Niger has led to an explosion in the number of initiatives. Between January 2017 and December 2018, 11 EU-funded MICs were identified in different parts of the country. New local and international intermediaries became involved, thus challenging the IOM’s leading role. International organizations, international NGOs and member states’ development agencies have been in charge of the majority of MICs in Niger. However, local NGOs and governmental agencies, as well as local marketing firms, artists and performers, have also played an increasing role in the dissemination of these campaigns. Although these actors tend to benefit from a lower level of responsibility and remuneration than their international counterparts, awareness-raising on irregular migration has become widely perceived as a profitable area for action amidst the local civil society of Niger. As Rodriguez (2019, p. 13) has shown in the case of Senegal, engaging in the fight against irregular migration can provide an opportunity for local unemployed youth to succeed since it offers a potential source of income, travel and symbolic gain.

Based on interviews carried out with the local and international actors involved in the development and dissemination of MICs in Niger, the following section analyses their practices and discourses in light of the theory of border spectacle. According to this theory:

Every form of border produces its own spectacle, its own representations. When we speak of the border spectacle, we emphasize the need to be aware of these various moments and forms of production and of the power-knowledge networks that constitute the border regime and give rise to their public image. (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015a, p. 68)

In the case of Niger, we have seen that the ‘hard’ measures adopted since 2015 as part of EU border externalization strategies have restricted freedom of movement across the country by criminalizing the transport of third-country nationals and increasing controls along the main routes. At the same time, however, these strategies have been accompanied by a ‘soft’ side in the proliferation of EU-funded MICs. Through these campaigns, the EU’s externalized border has been dramatically brought into the ‘intimate spaces of everyday life’ of local communities where migrants live or through which they pass (Williams, 2020, p. 1200). This ‘spectacularization’ of EU border externalization in Niger is analysed in two stages: first, the two distinct acts through which the spectacle is performed are detailed; and second, the two-sided narrative conveyed by these campaigns is described as forming a border spectacle of migrant victimization and stigmatization.

## A TWO-ACT PERFORMANCE FOR ‘POTENTIAL MIGRANTS’

The first finding emerging from the interviews concerns the target audience of EU-funded MICs. Of the 11 campaigns identified in this research, only three involved activities aimed at migrants in transit in Niger, while all of them, without exception, included activities aimed at



**Figure 2.** 'BEWARE! "Transporting migrants illegally exposes you to a fine of between 1,000,000 and 3,000,000 CFA francs".'

Source: Author, in Niamey, December 2018.

the local population (see Table A1 in the supplemental data online). As such, MICs challenge the idea that Niger is mainly considered a transit country by EU actors, highlighting instead that 'migration management governs not only the mobility of non-citizens but the rootedness of citizens' (Watkins, 2020, p. 15). Furthermore, although some initiatives addressed Nigeriens as potential migrant smugglers (Figure 2), the vast majority targeted them as 'potential migrants'. Therefore, the first specificity of the border spectacle produced by MICs in Niger is that it is aimed at two distinct categories of potential migrants, resulting in two separate acts of migration deterrence.

### Act I

The first act of the border spectacle engendered by EU-funded MICs is performed through the hyper-visibility of migration deterrence for the Nigerien population. This contrasts with the fact that irregular migration was not considered a major social issue in the country before 2015. Since then, the hyper-visibility of migration deterrence in the public space has been enacted through the proliferation of campaigns in the mainstream and digital media, and in particular through the multiplication of small-scale 'community outreach' events performed in direct contact with the local population. These events are usually based on a mix of film screenings, public debates, testimonies of returned migrants, quizzes, artistic performances (e.g., dance, music) and/or 'forum theatre' (i.e., a traditional form of theatre that invites the attendees to take part in the scene and offer their solutions to the problems exposed by the actors). To promote their awareness-raising events, interviewees reported the engagement of community radio advertisements, 'town criers', social media posts, urban posters or discussions during the 'Fadas', a socialization



**Figure 3.** The International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) van funded by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and used for the awareness-raising campaign ‘In da na sa’ni’ (‘If only I had known’ in Hausa), April 2019.

Source: IOM Niger Facebook page, 1 February 2019.

structure typical of Niger where groups of men gather in the streets at the end of the day to converse and drink tea (interview, 22 November 2017).

Community outreach events generally take place on the main public squares to attract as many attendees as possible without targeting a certain category of the population in particular. For this purpose, they can be organized in the context of major sporting or cultural events, or through the framework of ‘itinerant caravans’ that go on tours for several weeks or months to reach remote village communities. The use of itinerant caravans to deter irregular migration follows a conventional practice of the development industry in Niger. Facing a context of mass illiteracy among geographically dispersed and rural populations, caravans are used as a privileged tool to address social issues ranging from sexual and reproductive health to political participation. With support from the EU, the IOM has recently invested in its own van equipped with a screen, projector and portable generator, thus allowing it to carry out its migration campaigns in a fully mobile and almost self-sufficient manner across Niger (Figure 3).

Beyond the general public, however, outreach activities carried out as part of MICs can also target specific subgroups of the local population. In most cases, the goal is to provide training to influential community members (e.g., journalists, religious or traditional leaders, heads of youth groups), so that they become ‘ambassadors’ for the campaign within their social networks. This ‘peer-to-peer’ approach to migration deterrence is often valued and promoted by the actors involved in MICs as a way to enhance the credibility of their sources and therefore elevate the impact of their message. For instance, in 2018, the EU civilian mission Eucap Sahel Niger Sahel organized a series of outreach events about irregular migration and human trafficking designed specifically for ‘women leaders’ in Agadez (interview, 5 December 2018). The same year, the IOM provided several trainings for radio journalists from Senegal and Niger via its *‘Aware Migrants’* campaign, which was funded by the Italian Ministry of Interior. According to an external consultant involved in the project, however, the hammering of messages aimed at dissuading irregular migration through the Sahara and the Mediterranean had already provoked a growing fatigue on the part of the audience. In his words:

After the trainings, we recorded several radio shows with first-hand testimonials from returning migrants. We did it in local languages, in order to really touch the public. During these shows I was staying 'in the kitchen', so that the audience does not think that the stories come from abroad. ... The main challenge was to gain potential migrants' trust, otherwise the message is perceived as Western propaganda to stop them from coming. While I was there, I observed a lot of mistrust towards deterrence messages in Niger. (phone interview, 3 December 2019)

Through this first act, the EU's externalized border is spectacularized for the Nigerien population in an attempt to deter them from leaving their country irregularly. In this case, MICs are presented as a preventive measure intended 'to do something for the Nigeriens, and counter the risk that all the fuzz surrounding migration in the country gives them the idea to leave. ... Especially in view of the anticipated demographic explosion in the country' (interview, 28 November 2018). This rationale for acting before the migration patterns of Nigerien citizens might eventually lead them to Europe is further exemplified in the large number of outreach events addressed specifically at young people and performed within youth centres or schools. Indeed, as a representative of an international NGO based in Niamey declared: 'Awareness-raising should start early since we have observed that young people could start making migratory projects from 10 or 11 years old' (interview, 30 November 2018). This first act of the spectacle therefore illustrates how far the 'preventive' logic of border externalization can be pushed through MICs, which seek to act not only before migration takes place, but also before a desire to migrate is even formulated in the minds of individuals.

## Act II

As opposed to the MICs aimed at the local population, which are characterized by their hyper-visibility in the Nigerien public space, awareness-raising activities targeting migrants in transit rely on a less formal approach and take place among more discrete scenery. Following the 2015 criminalization of migrant smuggling, migrants in transit through Niger have progressively moved underground to avoid being caught by the police. Consequently, the actors who try to target them specifically now operate in strategic locations such as bus stations or the so-called 'ghettos' where migrants are housed before the desert crossing. However, since most migrants from the sub-region have already travelled a long way to Niger in the hope of reaching North Africa, they are particularly suspicious of overt attempts to discourage them from going further. The actors involved in MICs must therefore work increasingly with 'intermediaries' who are deemed more likely to gain migrants' trust and foster informality. In this way, messages of migration deterrence are conveyed under the guise of spontaneous conversation uninfluenced by ulterior motives.

For instance, since 2016, the IOM has built a network of more than 50 'community mobilizers' (mobcoms) directed towards this end. Every day, these intermediaries patrol the main cities along migration routes, made recognizable by their jacket bearing the EU flag and a light bulb as a symbol for 'enlightened' migration decision. Often recruited among former migrants themselves, the mobcoms are expected to employ their first-hand knowledge of the perils of the journey alongside the communication techniques taught by the IOM to try to convince reluctant migrants to give up their initial plans. In practice, their role is to refer as many as possible to the IOM's transit centres, where migrants can receive food and shelter on the condition that they enrol in 'assisted voluntary return' programmes to their country of origin. Originally, the concept of community mobilizers referred to an approach developed by the IOM to face humanitarian crisis contexts, such as the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010. Local actors were then recruited to communicate more effectively with the population and avoid potential misunderstandings or rumours about the organization's work (IOM, 2010). Niger is the first country where this approach has been officially adapted to serve a purpose of irregular migration



deterrence. Beyond this new label, however, the IOM has a long history of informal collaboration with indigenous intermediaries to promote voluntary return from transit countries such as Morocco (Maâ, 2020).

In addition, this growing desire to informally approach migrants in transit in Niger is exhibited clearly by an emerging actor in West Africa: the private company Seefar. Based in Hong Kong, this ‘social enterprise’ has specialized in providing strategic communication services to governments in the field of irregular migration, human trafficking and religious radicalization since 2014. For the purpose of migration deterrence, which has become its core business in recent years, Seefar has created an original branding named ‘*The Migrant Project*’, which is being replicated across the various countries where it operates. In 2018, Seefar received funding from the European Commission to lead a campaign on irregular migration in Niger. For this project, it recruited a network of 20 local ‘counsellors’ in Niamey and Agadez, who were subsequently trained on the topic of migration and oral persuasion techniques. Their role was to answer a free hotline that migrants could call for advice, and to disseminate information on the ground through ‘word-of-mouth’ strategies. In order to encourage informal one-on-one conversations with migrants and ‘*for reasons of discretion*’, these counsellors were instructed not to mention Seefar to avoid arousing the suspicion in their interlocutors (phone interview, 4 August 2020).

In conclusion, the spectacularization of EU border externalization in Niger is composed of two acts of migration deterrence, which differ in audience and staging. The first act takes place in plain sight, in public squares or in schools, and is mainly performed through the proliferation of hyper-visible community outreach events targeting the Nigerien population. The second act follows migrants from the sub-region in transit through the country and is played out in hiding places, using as informal an approach as possible. It is therefore through the combination of these two distinct acts that the EU’s externalized border is being spectacularized for ‘potential migrants’ in Niger, with the intent to reduce irregular departures from the country. It will now be shown how the discourses and images circulated through these campaigns produce conflicting representations of the ‘illegalized migrant’.

## A SPECTACLE OF MIGRANT VICTIMIZATION AND STIGMATIZATION

Two main narratives emerge from the analysis of the interviews and the documentation collected about the 11 MICs that took place in Niger between January 2017 and December 2018. By mobilizing the theory of the border spectacle, these two complementary narratives can be differentiated on the basis of the figure of the ‘illegalized migrant’ that they contribute to portraying and rendering visible. The first focuses on the perils of irregular migration journeys to produce a spectacle of migrant *victimization*. The second aims to promote local opportunities as alternatives to irregular migration to produce a spectacle of migrant *stigmatization*.

The first narrative identified mainly involves representations of the deaths occurring in the Sahara and the Mediterranean, as well as the abuses faced by migrants en route to Europe (e.g., corruption, torture, detention and trafficking). This is by far the most common type of content in Niger; all the MICs examined in this research included at least some form of warning about the risks of irregular migration. In many cases, the actors involved in spreading such messages emphasized the importance of migrating legally instead, but disregarded the fact that safe and legal channels remain inaccessible to the vast majority of candidates in Niger. The deployment of ‘fear-appeal messages’ to scare people off migration aspirations (Schans & Optekamp, 2016) evolved after November 2017 as several actors began to focus increasingly on the deteriorating security situation in Libya in response to the CNN video of Sub-Saharan migrants being sold in a ‘slave market’. In the literature on MICs, attention has already been paid to how this narrative concerning the risks of irregular migration plays out in different contexts. The analysis below illustrates three specific features in the case of Niger.



First, whereas Bishop (2020, p. 1107) has noted that deterrence campaigns produced by Western governments tend to portray migrants as 'anonymous masses' with no backstory or voice, the material reviewed in this research indicates instead a tendency to personalize migrant stories in order to evoke emotional identification in the audience. This is mainly done through the use of real-life testimonies of returned migrants, or by staging the fictional stories of individual characters with deliberately 'generic' features from their departure to their ruin (e.g., through the production of comics, theatre plays or video clips). In this way, the detail of migrants' suffering and that of their relatives back home is intended to impact the audience more profoundly than the case of anonymous masses (Figure 4).

Second, the narrative about the risks of irregular migration is based on the extensive use of two Manichean 'icons' (Cohen & Ramel, 2016, p. 85) – archetypal images that are repeated in a consistent way throughout the campaigns. On the one hand, there is the shameless 'smuggler/trafficker', who is portrayed as the villain responsible for all the ills of migrants (Musarò, 2019, p. 3; Oeppen, 2016, p. 9). On the other, there is the female migrant, embodying the ultimate symbol of vulnerability, for whom the road ahead promises to be even more dangerous than for her male travel companions. The influence of gender in the discourses conveyed by US-funded MICs in South America has been pointed out by Williams (2020), who demonstrates how particular bodies can be mobilized for their emotional and affective potential. In the case of Niger, it appears that the gendered representation of vulnerability operates through the recurrent representation of migrant women as innocent victims of sex trafficking (Figure 4) and/or helpless mothers in charge of children (Figure 5b).

Third, the narrative of the risks faced by migrants is based on imagery of violence and death that is situated far away from the EU's territorial border lines. Indeed, neither the violence exerted by border officials through the arrests, detentions and refoulements of migrants nor the technologies of surveillance and capture deployed at the borders are ever mentioned as a deterrent through the campaigns. Instead, EU-funded MICs depict migrants' experiences of violence and death as being located along the route itself, particularly in the Sahara and the Mediterranean. Although these two areas are historical crossroads in the mobility of goods and people, they are characterized as chaotic 'no-go zones', the traversal of which will inevitably be traumatic for migrants (Figure 5). Such a narrative thus transforms the 'raw physicality' (Doty, 2011, p. 607) of the desert and the sea into an element of dissuasion and contributes to 'naturalize' (Kosnick, 2014, p. 11) the conditions under which migrants face violence and death during their journey.

To summarize, the first narrative conveyed by EU-funded MICs in Niger contributes to the production of what De Genova (2015) has called a 'border spectacle of migrant victimization' through the diffusion of a patronizing discourse that portrays migrants as passive victims in need of care and protection. This discourse has further been described as helping to nurture a 'compassionate repression' towards migrants (Musarò, 2019) and to normalize a simplistically divided world of nationals and foreigners (Watkins, 2020). In the case of Niger, however, it can be argued that this narrative serves another implicit purpose, which is to conceal the political causes of the suffering increasingly experienced by migrants. Indeed, reference to the political decisions that have led Sub-Saharan migrants to take ever greater risks during their journey to North Africa and Europe are completely absent from the content of EU-funded MICs. In concrete terms, this means that while the restrictive measures adopted by the Nigerian government to fight irregular migration are sometimes mentioned as a deterrent, the fact that these measures form an integral part of the EU's border externalization strategy is never made explicit. As a result, the border spectacle of migrant victimization performed through MICs involves staging the figure of the 'migrant victim' while detaching completely it from the EU's border enforcement policy.

The second narrative identified emphasizes the opportunities available to succeed in one's origin country and occasionally proposes legal migration options within the ECOWAS. Although



**Figure 4.** Last page of the comic book *Rêves et Enfer* about a young Guinean who leaves Conakry for the dream of Europe, and available at the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) headquarters in Niamey.

Note: Box 1: Joyful ends up in a brothel. 2: 'You were promised to be free when you have paid your debt?' 3: 'Poor thing, you've been cheated! Some of us have been paying the same debt for 10 years.' 4: Joseph works in a clandestine mine without any protection equipment. 5: The two migrants who did not find any buyer are locked up and beaten. 'If your parents do not pay the ransom, you are going to die here.' 6: Martin bitterly regrets his choice. . . . 7: He misses his family terribly and regrets wasting so much money. . . . 8: 'Adjo my daughter, your big brother will soon become very rich to free us from misery!' 'Yippe!' 9: . . . And to finish his life in detention.

Source: International Organization for Migration's (IOM) 'Aware Migrants' campaign, unknown artist and date of publication.



**Figure 5** (a). Social network advertisements from 'The Migrant Project' campaign funded by the European Commission and implemented by Seefar in Niger, 17 December 2018.

Note: The original Facebook caption reads: 'The Sahara Desert is a huge, ungoverned region where many criminal gangs attack, rob and kidnap migrants. The journey through the desert can take weeks.' Source: Le Projet Migrant.

still less common than the narrative focusing on the risks, this type of more 'positive' approach to migration deterrence is gaining ground in Niger and elsewhere in West Africa. In practice, it operates by simultaneously demystifying South–North mobility, breaking down the image of Europe as a supposed 'El Dorado' and replacing it with the glorification of a sedentary lifestyle in Africa. This narrative is illustrated in the documentary film *Redemption Song*, which was broadcast in several youth centres in Niger in 2018 and 2019. The film follows the story of Cissoko Aboubakar, a Guinean refugee living in Italy, who takes on a mission to return to Africa and instruct the youth about the 'reality' of irregular migration to Europe. The trailer, available on YouTube,<sup>1</sup> describes the project as follows:

Cissoko feels the urge to convince young people who leave Africa for the dream of the West, not to emigrate in view of chimeras: 'The magnificent land of Africa contains in itself all the resources that we Africans, united, can fructify, but it is necessary to free our minds first, to reach a new awareness.'

Instead of seeking to deter potential candidates by highlighting the dangers associated with irregular migration, this narrative rather promotes what Pécoud (2012, p. 49) has called a 'culture of immobility' within migrant-sending regions. This promotion of sedentariness directly confronts the entrenched social imaginary in West Africa that values 'adventurous migration' as a quest for personal emancipation (Bredeloup, 2014) and risk-taking as evidence of migrants' ability to overcome the obstacles standing in their way (Brachet, 2009, p. 289). The ambition to change the positive





**Figure 5 (b).** Social network advertisements from ‘The Migrant Project’ campaign funded by the European Commission and implemented by Seefar in Niger, 28 November 2018.

Note: The original Facebook caption reads: ‘When crossing the Mediterranean, women are less likely to survive a shipwreck. They often cannot swim, while they are trying to save the lives of their children.’ Source: Le Projet Migrant.

public image associated with migration in Niger is clearly illustrated by the way in which the IOM praises the use of ‘participatory theatre’ to shape local perceptions on this question:

Participatory theatre breaks down the ‘fourth wall’ that physically and verbally separates the performer from the audience. ... The cultural tradition in most West African countries views migration as a necessary transition to adulthood. Young men are encouraged to dare irregular migration and the risks and perils associated with it in order to embody this image of the ‘hero migrant’ that no longer fits the reality of today. Specialized actors can amplify performances in order to turn into new ‘heroes’ the image of young national workers who participate in the development of their countries of origin. (IOM Niger, 2016)

Unlike the former, this narrative does not portray migrants as passive victims to be rescued, but rather aims to tarnish the ‘heroic’ image that migrants might have claimed in favour of valorizing those who have decided to stay and develop their country of origin. In so doing, EU-funded MICs attempt to construct a new patriotic imaginary that would make irregular migration ‘the choice of the ignorant, the stupid, the lazy, or the old-fashioned’ (Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007, p. 1684). The circulation of this narrative highlighting opportunities to succeed locally in migrants’ countries of origin and transit has not been the object of much academic scrutiny thus far. It is, however, consistent with Oeppen’s (2016, p. 10) argument that MICs primarily aim towards the ‘shifting of responsibility and blame’ for the risks taken during the journey ‘onto the migrants themselves’ rather than the absence of safe and legal alternatives. In the context of Niger, it is therefore argued that the circulation of such

a narrative produces a border spectacle that acts through the social 'stigmatization' of irregular migrants in order to delegitimize the forms of mobility that take place outside the regulatory frameworks provided by states.

In conclusion, through the mobilization of a two-sided narrative concerning risks and opportunities, the implementation of EU-funded MICs in Niger has engendered a border spectacle of migrant victimization and stigmatization. Although they may seem contradictory, the two figures of the victimized and blamed migrant are mutually reinforced through the performance of the spectacle as they serve the same purpose of irregular migration deterrence through different means. By concealing the violence entailed by EU border externalization and shaping representations of the legitimate means of access to mobility, both characterizations ultimately serve to justify and sustain the unequal mobility regime imposed on populations from the 'Global South'.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since 2015, human mobility across the Sahara has been hampered by the strengthening of controls driven by the externalization of EU borders in Niger, subjecting those who wish to circulate there to increased risk. While the 'hard' measures adopted as part of this strategy – the criminalization of migrant smuggling and the securitization of migration routes – have been extensively documented in the media and academic literature, its 'softer' aspects have received less attention. Based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews conducted with the actors involved in the development and dissemination of these campaigns, this paper has undertaken an analysis of 11 MICs funded by the EU and its member states in Niger between 2017 and 2018. The analysis of the empirical material has been carried out in light of the theory of the 'border spectacle' developed by De Genova. The objective has been to complement the critical literature on MICs by showing, first, how their implementation contributes to the dramatic enactment of the EU's externalized border for different categories of 'potential migrants'; and second, how this spectacularization favours certain representations of 'illegalized' migration while excluding others.

The analysis has demonstrated that the border spectacle engendered by EU-funded campaigns in Niger took place in two acts, which vary according to their target audience and staging. The first act consists of a hyper-visibility of migration deterrence for the local population, while the second is characterized by the informalization of deterrence strategies targeting migrants in transit through the country. Furthermore, it has shown that a two-sided narrative emerged through the performance of this spectacle, wherein one focuses on the dangers associated with irregular migration and the other emphasizes the opportunities available to succeed 'at home'. The circulation of this two-sided narrative has been shown to produce a border spectacle of migrant victimization and stigmatization that acts both to conceal the political causes of the violence faced by migrants on their way to North Africa and Europe and to delegitimize those who persist with migration in spite of these risks.

These findings make two important contributions to the existing literature on migration and border studies. First, they confirm that the concept of border spectacle can be fruitfully mobilized to deepen the analysis of 'soft' migration management instruments such as MICs that are implemented outside the EU's borders. This original application of the concept has identified an emerging type of spectator, the potential migrant, as well as new figures of the 'illegalized' migrant who are constructed through the staging of the migration route itself, rather than that of militarized border lines and sea rescues. Second, the results presented here contribute to enriching the conceptualization of externalization as a process by which destination states export not only the means to block migrants preventively, but also ideas and representations intent upon guiding how third-country citizens should view irregular migration and those who choose this path. As such, a promising research prospect would be to explore the resistances that emerge in the face of the imposition of this externally driven narrative within migrants'



countries of origin and transit, particularly in the case of African societies with a long tradition of cross-border mobility.

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## NOTE

1. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxC37Z7UfO0/>.

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