

Unveiling the Digital Landscape on African Migration

Influence, incentives, and hybrid threats: why the digital sphere is a fundamental dimension of migration-related activities

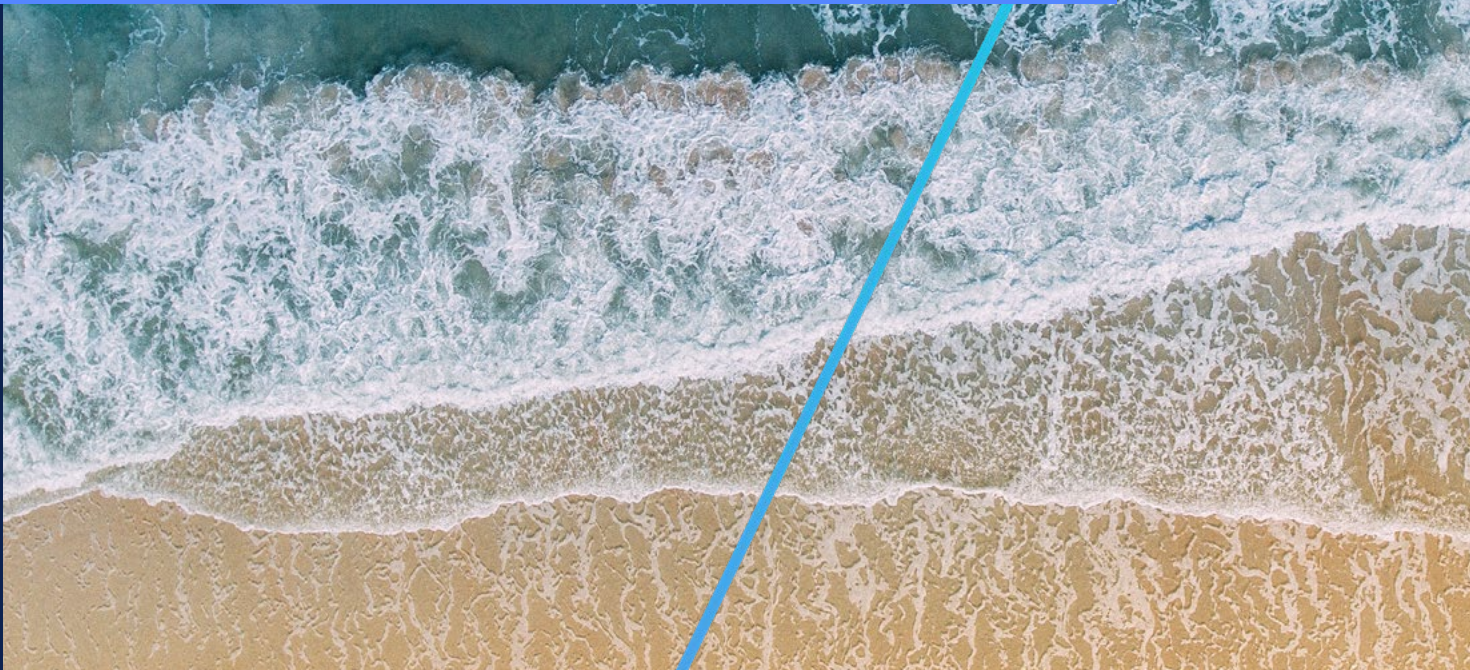


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Introduction, Context, and Key Research Questions

This body of research, developed by [Alto Intelligence](#) in collaboration with the [IE School of Politics, Economics, and Global Affairs](#), conducts an extensive analysis of public digital media, including blogs, forums, social networks, messaging apps, deep and dark web forums, and other digital communities engaging in illegal activity. This work aims to better understand the interrelationships between public discourse related to African migration and the role of the digital ecosystem in fostering illegal migration flows. We are committed to supporting collective defense efforts and look forward to partnering and sharing information about our findings with law enforcement, industry partners, and others to drive continued progress for a safer online ecosystem.

Key research questions to be explored in this report include:

1. Who are the principal public actors, and what are the key narratives driving and shaping the public debate within the intra- and transcontinental digital conversation on migration between Europe and Africa?
2. To which point does the digital ecosystem play a role in modeling push and pull factors for migrants?
3. What can signals of distortion and targeted influence within the digital sphere reveal about digital activity related to migration movements emerging from or focused on Africa and the African-European dimension of migration?
4. How are malign actors becoming more adept at concealing illegal activities using opaque digital spaces like closed communities and the deep and dark web?

The two principal dimensions of African migration can be outlined as internal or "circular" migration within the continent (also known as "intracontinental migration"), an element closely linked to the African cultural and ethnic reality, accounting for most of the migratory movements on the continent, and

emigration out of Africa. [Emigration from Africa has followed a progressively increasing trend in recent decades](#), generating significant international attention, especially in Europe, due to its political, social, humanitarian, and economic dimensions ¹.

1. The regional dimensions of African migration (Northern/Southern Africa) are distinct, given they are two phenomena with unique cultural, linguistic, and political characteristics. As a continental development hub, South Africa is a reception pole for immigration with differentiated characteristics as the final destination of intra-African flows. Conversely, Maghreb, Sahelian, and sub-Saharan countries constitute the fundamental axis of illegal migratory flows towards Europe, feeding Western (to Spain) and Central Mediterranean (to Italy, Cyprus and Malta) migration routes. Moreover, both dimensions are inevitably intertwined. Some of the leading countries of departure of African flows towards Europe have traditionally been recipients of labor and human capital from neighboring countries, given that 80% of African migrants are not interested in leaving the continent.

These flows serve as a fundamental pillar upon which:

- A. Perceptions and sentiments about individual migrants and migrant communities are reflected in online conversations and activity.
- B. Push and pull factors that coexist with and contribute to sustained migratory flows are entrenched within targeted digital channels. These channels exist because of pressures related to migratory trends but thrive off of and amplify audiences and reach – thus impacting and characterizing key digital touchpoints related to migration ².
- C. Media, citizen, and institutional or policy-level positions are jointly shaped, created, and communicated within the digital media ecosystem, influencing the complex sociopolitical debate on policy and the perception of various institutions' roles and obligations.

As reflected in this research, the regional-international character of the digital conversation related to immigration is characterized by transnational migratory routes and affects a plurality of countries and continents.

Moreover, and especially concerning the departures from the coasts of Morocco and Algeria, there is a progressive digitally driven banalization of the risks involved in such a journey. As such, and as evidenced extensively in this report's findings, illegal migration turns into an 'adventure' in search of a better future. The power and effectiveness of this narrative by groups seeking to commercialize upon the demand to exit the continent are apparent ³.

While "the border" is a complex and imperfect sociological and political concept, this study demonstrates the

relationship between the borderless digital ecosystem and the policies, laws, and regulatory systems that formally aim to manage migratory tendencies and movements. At the migration-related discourse level, local, regional, national, and global conversations characterize rich and diverse debates with many distributed channels, domains, actors, narratives, and communities. Furthermore, the commercialization of illegal migratory support networks and resources intended to attract and capture vulnerable individuals alongside the illicit production, falsification, and sale of documentation flourish within contexts where robust push and pull motivations abound. These vulnerabilities lay the ground for malign influence operations and hybrid threats that financial, geopolitical, or other incentives can drive.

². In contrast to realities in the origin countries which may push migrants to emigrate, messages and experiences disseminated from Europe through Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms by successful migrants offer an idyllic and glamorous impression of the irregular stay on European soil, exhibiting a luxurious lifestyle and omitting the associated hardships, a trend common to the social media sphere in other contexts as well. [This phenomenon has become known in the sociological sphere as 'the lie of migration' and is a decisive pull factor.](#) It exploits the unhappiness caused by the lack of expectations of young people in the main countries of origin and transit while discouraging and distracting individuals from engagement with other means of development at the local or regional level.

³. Evidence includes the 'Comments' section of posts providing open tips on how to enter Europe irregularly, best dates, times, zones, weather forecasts, support telephone numbers of traffickers, or strategies to regularize the stay or, at the very least, avoid deportation.

Executive Summary

The insights contained in this report evidence the ways in which activity across the digital ecosystem is deeply connected with the phenomenon of African migration across multiple layers—from the weaponization of migration-linked narratives to polarize European public political debate to the systematic use of both public and private digital channels (such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, and others) to coordinate illegal commercial activities related to migration flows. In mapping these relationships, this analysis underscores how the digital ecosystem is a critical proxy for understanding key dimensions of migration and associated incentives and vulnerabilities that precede the materialization of Hybrid Threats.

This research aims to understand the relationship between public narratives and coordinated information and disinformation operations (IO) within the context and processes underlying African migration and the digital ecosystem—across the surface, social, deep, and dark web. Our investigations prioritize a rigorous analysis of technical indicators, digital propagation patterns, and malign tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). In this way, our research is designed to establish accurate assessments concerning deceptive activities and determine the role of coordinated inauthentic behavior and the influence of malign actors.

The three key findings from our investigation include

A. Public discourse on African migration is weaponized in Europe and Africa by distinct actors for different purposes.

A substantial volume of total results in our analysis focuses on the digital public sphere conversation related to migration occurring on Twitter, revealing the interplay between local and global narratives driven by a multitude of actors. Perceptions and positions related to immigration by institutions, media and journalists, politicians, and NGOs play a critical role in shaping the debate, while local or regional conversations depict sentiments and views more directly related to the reality of potential migrants. Within this framing, analyses of abnormalities and inorganic activity demonstrate the role of disinformation campaigns and how online discourse can be distorted.

B. Bad actors use advanced digital marketing and sales tactics across both public and closed digital communities with malign, illegal intent.

Our research uncovered a network of 188 public Facebook groups exploited to build audiences and generate a funnel of leads by employing marketing- and sales-driven tactics (e.g., payment on arrival, limited availability, flash sales). These practices capitalize on targeted narratives related to specific migration-related push and pull factors that may increase engagement, such as sharing content focused on alleviating safety concerns or emphasizing social, economic, or political frustrations in countries of origin for migration. Our analysis of these Facebook groups describes these tactics at length, including the messages and content distributed to their over 5.6 million members.

While Facebook is also used to increase demand for illicit travel-related services and forgeries, both specific Facebook and Telegram groups serve as "pre-final" touchpoints, frequently directing users to closed channels (closed groups or messaging apps such as WhatsApp) for the sale of illegal services or false documentation. We have investigated 33 Telegram groups with over 132K members and 8 WhatsApp groups of interest. Among 151 users of interest uniquely identified offering illicit services from at least 39 different countries (derived from associated mobile numbers), many were detected in multiple groups; 2 out of 3 were identified in 2 or more groups, and one user of interest was detected in 22 different Facebook groups which indicates that these groups actually work well for the interests of these actors. It is important to note that close to 70% of these Facebook groups were created before 2022, some as early as 2014 and that they have avoided enforcement policies for years now. At the same time, there are numerous new groups being created and activated. Nested obfuscation, especially within messaging apps such as Telegram or WhatsApp, but also on Facebook, is becoming the new normal: bad actors will provide links to new groups and then more new links within those groups, forcing users to digitally migrate. We believe this is done on the one hand to increase the complexity of attribution, but also to better segment those users with a higher level of engagement creating a funnel in sales-like fashion.

C. Unmasking a sample of malign users of interest provides evidence that those behind illegal migration-related activities are not confined solely to Africa—rather, they are globally distributed and specialized in highly segmented activities such as the sophisticated forgery of documents.

Alto's threat intelligence team investigated the metadata of a sample of malign users of interest identified in this research using "Alto Hunter" our proprietary tool that leverages the world's most extensive collection of curated breached, leaked, and deep and dark web exposed data (+124B records and +180B curated identity attributes). We aimed to conduct a rapid and agile investigation into those digital entities with evident malicious digital activity. Drilling into metadata and attributes tied to domains, monikers, user profiles, and public groups used, we have confirmed that some of the digital profiles behind the creation and operation of these groups are real individuals. These individuals are connected, in some cases, to companies with links to forgery or illicit trafficking networks outside of Africa, mainly in Europe and Asia.



Photo Credit: William Hook

General Metrics

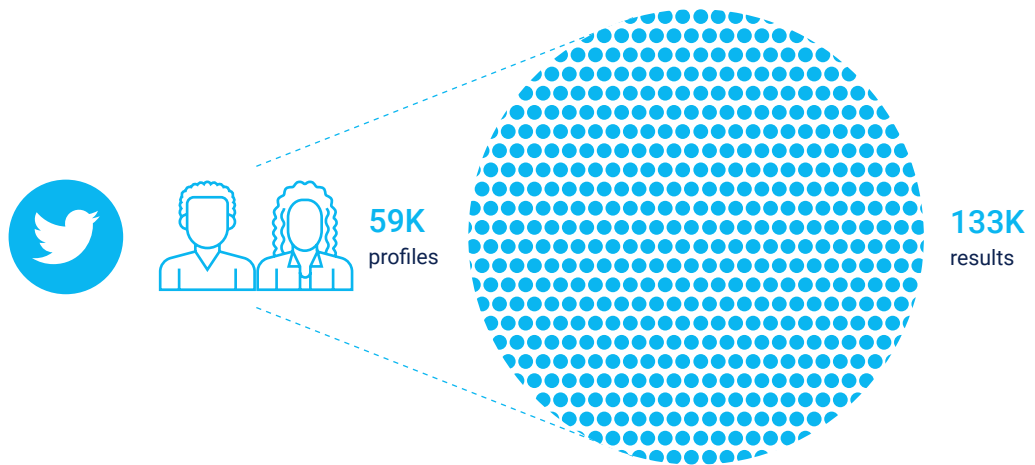
This document delves into key research findings from Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram. In order to focus on the sources that we believe are more representative of the objectives of the investigation, findings from other digital sources impacting the presented findings have not been included in this section and are outlined in the Annex.

Twitter. Over the period of analysis, some 133K results from 59K profiles interacting on Twitter were captured and indexed, enabling an in-depth quantitative analysis of the key communities characterizing the digital debate on African migration.

Analyzing the propagation of interactions and activity on public platforms allows us to map the distribution of digital entities, such as profiles or URLs and domains, and their proximity or relationship to others. In this analysis, each 'result' equates to a data point representing a relevant post, publication, video, or image.

Facebook & Telegram. Alto's analysis also detected 188 public Facebook groups with over 5.6M members and 33 public Telegram groups with over 132K members. The content and conversations distributed and tailored to targeted audiences within these groups are detailed in this report.

→
133K
results were
generated from
59K
profiles



f → **188** **5.6M**
Groups Members

Telegram → **33** **132K**
Groups Members

Community Network Analysis

Message Propagation

Alto's data scientists applied clustering algorithms, like Louvain Method for community detection, to determine the different communities of users contributing to and interacting within the digital debate related to migration, enabling a visual representation of the resulting network. Out of a total of 59,100 profiles and their corresponding 133,544 total interactions (e.g. replies), those with zero algorithmic influence across the network were excluded in order to highlight the most relevant conversations. Using this methodology, profiles or "authors" generating activity are clustered using an unbiased, non-human assisted approach, enabling a mapping and clustering of both profiles and their corresponding communities based on their affinity of interaction with other users across the digital conversation on African migration.

Among the twenty most relevant communities detected across the debate our research identifies a clear trend distinguishing two types of communities;

- A. local communities discussing real challenges of migrants, offering insight into the contextual push and pull factors driving the phenomenon, and criticizing specific regional or local cases such as in Morocco, Algeria, or Libya
- B. international communities engaging in political, polarized debates around migration driven by European politicians, media, and journalists

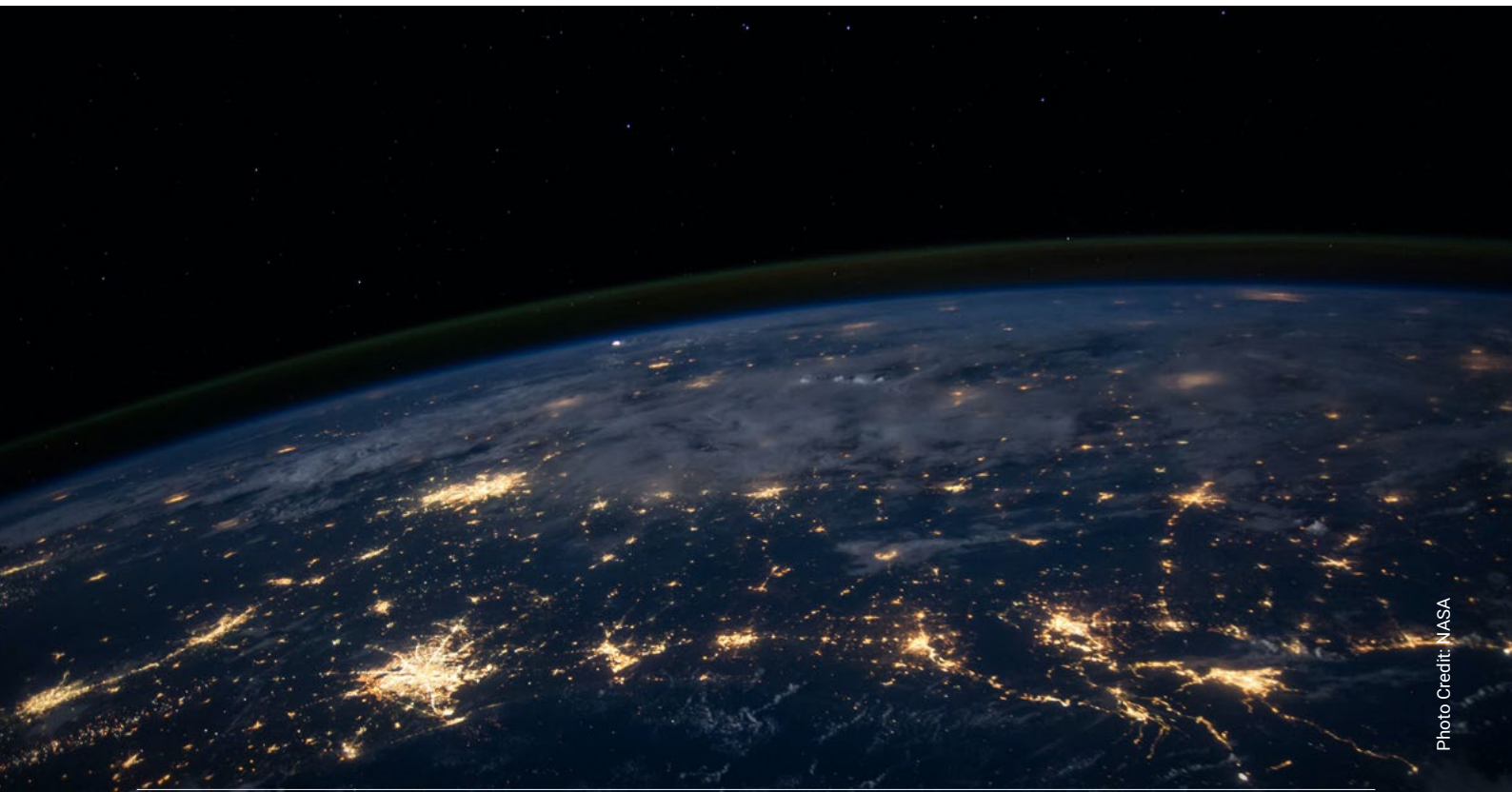


Photo Credit: NASA



The size of the node represents the level of influence within the network of users



The thickness of the links depends on the volume of interactions among connected nodes



The color of a node indicates the community to which it belongs



Message
Propagation Network
59,100 profiles
133,544 results

- #1. French community against illegal immigration. 21.1%
- #5. Algerians on Moroccan treatment of immigrants. 6.0%
- #9. Pro-migrant French and African community. 3.9%
- #13. Nigerian immigrants' community. 3.3%
- #17. IOM and UN actions for the protection of Sub-Saharan migrants. 2.3%
- #2. Moroccan media on Algerian treatment of immigrants. 10.2%
- #6. Western users critical of immigrants and NGOs. 5.4%
- #10. Anti-conservative community in defense of immigrants. 3.7%
- #14. Intra-African immigration conversation. 2.8%
- #18. International non-profit refugee advocates. 1.8%
- #3. International community on discrimination issues facing immigrants. 8.0%
- #7. Accusations of violence and requests for deportation of immigrants in Europe. 4.6%
- #11. Western community critical of US and NATO. 3.7%
- #15. Saudi-Arabian anti-racism community. 2.7%
- #19. Tunisian community defending immigrants. 1.7%
- #4. International NGOs for sea-rescue missions and migrant support networks. 7.2%
- #8. Anti-racism and Islamophobia activism. 4.1%
- #12. French community criticizing government treatment of migrants and defending the "sans-papiers" immigrants. 3.6%
- #16. Libyan Media spreading immigration-related news. 2.4%
- #20. British community in defense of migrant's rights. 1.6%

Key Narratives Emerging in the Public Digital Debate on Migration

It is important to note the diverse spectrum of emerging narratives in these communities that enable us to map and understand vulnerable or sensitive themes that can be exacerbated or inflamed with strategic intent to shape discourse and public sentiment. In mapping these narratives, our analysis uncovers a varied distribution of mixed conversations in defense of human rights and criticisms of policies, institutions, governments, and other groups for perceived injustices related to immigration, within which campaigns aimed at increasing the visibility of mistreatment and racism suffered by refugees and immigrants are identified.

Many of the narratives that contain important discussions on the mistreatment of immigrant populations also host targeted claims and accusations toward national or regional authorities (see Communities #2 (Moroccan media on Algerian treatment of immigrants) and #5 (Algerians On Moroccan Treatment Of Immigrants) focused on Morocco and Algeria), public institutions, policymakers and public officials, and national governments and their roles in the migratory phenomena. While criticisms are often justified, their varied presence within a highly sensitive sociopolitical debate illustrates the complex emergence of narrative-driven vulnerabilities that impact discourse and perceptions of distinct stakeholders.

Principal insights regarding the most prevalent narratives in the network analysis include:

1. The institutional and sociopolitical nature of narratives diffused on Twitter is important to highlight. Public institutions, NGOs, journalists, media, and activists offer visibility to the social, political and humanitarian problems associated with immigration. At the local level, conversations center on local African citizens calling attention to the challenges and hardships of immigrants and discussing critical push factors that characterize emigration out of many African countries. These include the consistent presence of climate change, environmental degradation, and national or regional insecurity as explanatory factors contextualizing displacement and subsequent migratory movements both within Africa and out of the continent.
2. Institutional inter-country discourse is identified on Twitter, particularly in the case of Morocco and Algeria, with actors, institutions, and media from both countries making public statements and allegations against each other's management of migrant populations.

* See Annex for detailed list of narratives generated in each community

When examining markedly negative narratives related to migration emerging from the principal communities identified, Alto's analysts noted:

1. Unsubstantiated and uncorroborated narratives attributing violence and social and economic degradation to immigrants are prevalent in European-driven anti-immigrant discourse, as identified in Communities #6 and #7 (Accusations of violence and requests for deportation of immigrants in Europe). Cases of sexual violence, riots, or crime are disseminated to portray immigrants as dangerous and destabilizing, and Islamophobic rhetoric is also linked to these types of arguments.
2. Many of these profiles focus on criticizing NGOs as a "pull factor" for migrants that encourage illegal migration and exacerbate migration-related challenges. In Community #6 (Western users critical of immigrants and NGOs) for example, NGOs, like including Doctors Without Borders, are targeted with unsubstantiated accusations, such as using humanitarian efforts as a cover for human trafficking. In this way, NGOs are politicized beyond the frame of humanitarian efforts and attributed culpability for a perceived problem related to migration flows.
3. In these communities, anti-immigration positions are linked to appeals for intervention from state entities, including the government and even the military. These appeals (along with point #3 (International community on discrimination issues facing immigrants)) are important to note in the context of narrative-driven vulnerabilities, distrust or discontentment with key institutions, and hybrid threats. Perceived institutional ineffectiveness in addressing address these issues satisfactorily for specific segments of the population is often targeted and amplified for malign intent, as revealed by research detailing the double-sided weaponization of other social issues (e.g. Black Lives Matter movement's relevance by Russia Today and Sputnik).

* See Annex for detailed list of narratives generated in each community



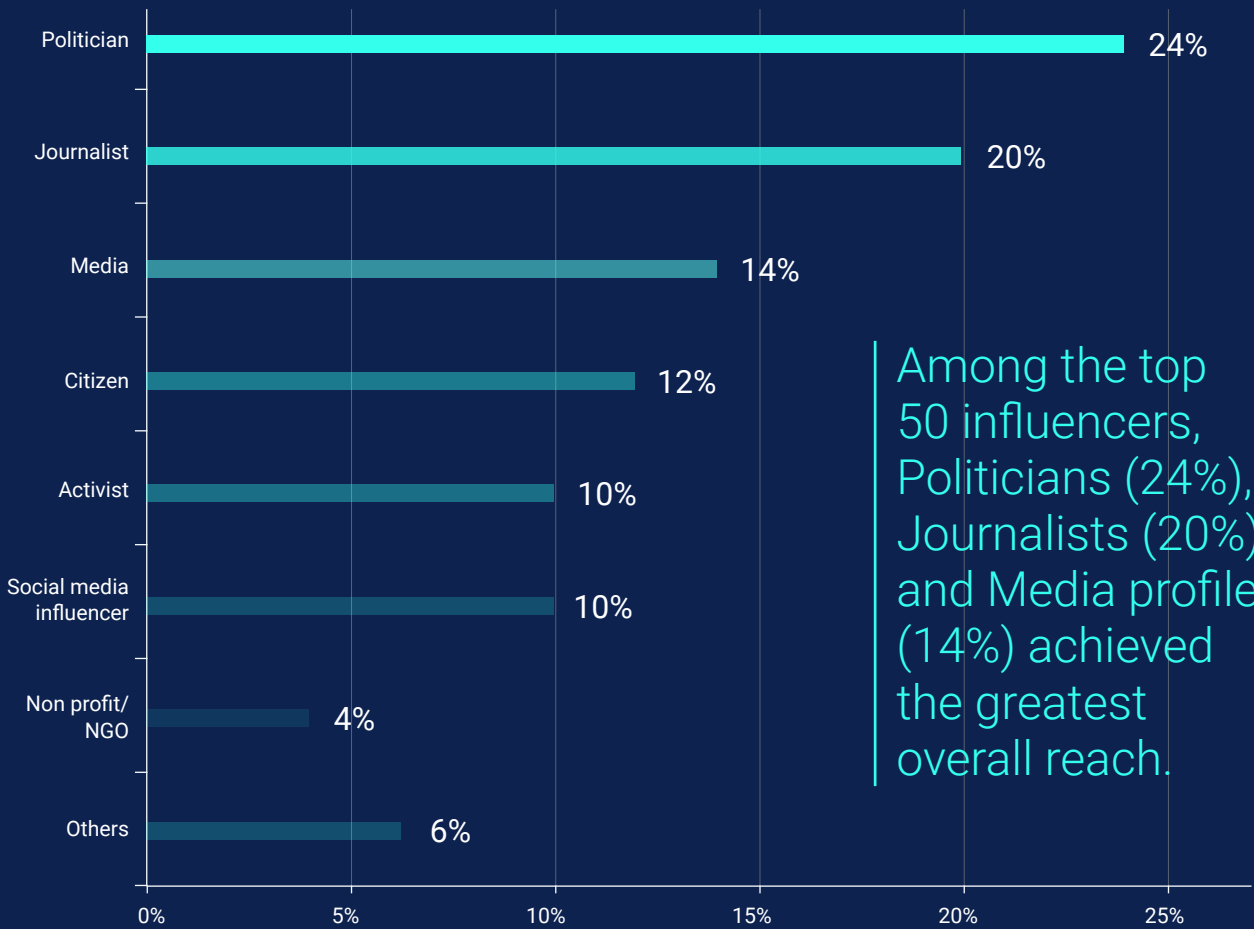
Most Influential Actors

Alto used algorithmic ranking techniques to classify and rank profiles by influence, taking various factors into account to determine the effectiveness of profiles at spreading their messages, accounting for both connections and proximity to other influential profiles throughout the network.

Among the top 50 most influential authors analyzed, 34% of the profiles belong to journalists or media organizations, connoting the critical role of media

actors in shaping this debate. 24% the most influential authors are political profiles, mostly conservative French politicians, underscoring the impact of political actors and their audiences in driving the institutional debate on African migration. To a lesser extent, non-profit organizations and international NGOs are also present in political, institutional discourse, while activists and citizens produce locally-relevant activity.

TOP 50 INFLUENCERS



Among the top 50 influencers, Politicians (24%), Journalists (20%), and Media profiles (14%) achieved the greatest overall reach.

Detection of High or Abnormal Activity Profiles

To determine the impact of users engaging with abnormal levels of activity, Alto's team analyzed statistical outliers across all previously identified communities to assess their posting frequency. Alto's analysts identified 608 (1.0%) users interacting with the highest frequency in the debate, producing 23.3% of the total conversation. These users generated over 31K posts over the period analyzed.

1 in 5 (21.1%) of these anomalous activity users were detected in the French Community Against Illegal Immigration, while 13.7% were clustered in the Moroccan Media Against the Algerian Treatment of Immigrants Community.

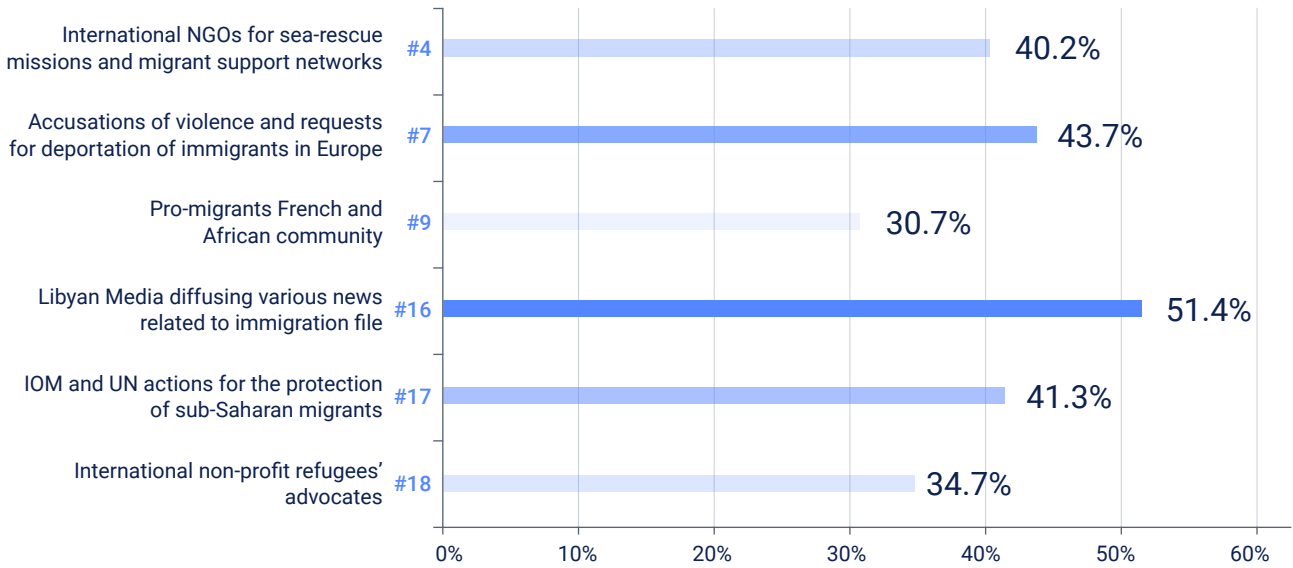
Notably, 9% of the highest activity users were also detected in the Algerians Against Moroccans for the Mistreatment of Immigrants Community.

Activist profiles in favor of human rights with alphanumeric accounts or anonymized profiles shape several communities. At the same time, high-activity users are also detected in elevated proportions in Community #7 (Accusations of Violence and Requests for Deportation of Immigrants in Europe). In the Libyan Media community, 51.4% of the activity is generated by high-activity profiles, signaling an inorganic focus on these specific communities (see page 14).

HIGH-ACTIVITY USERS GENERATE 23.3% OF THE TOTAL CONVERSATION.



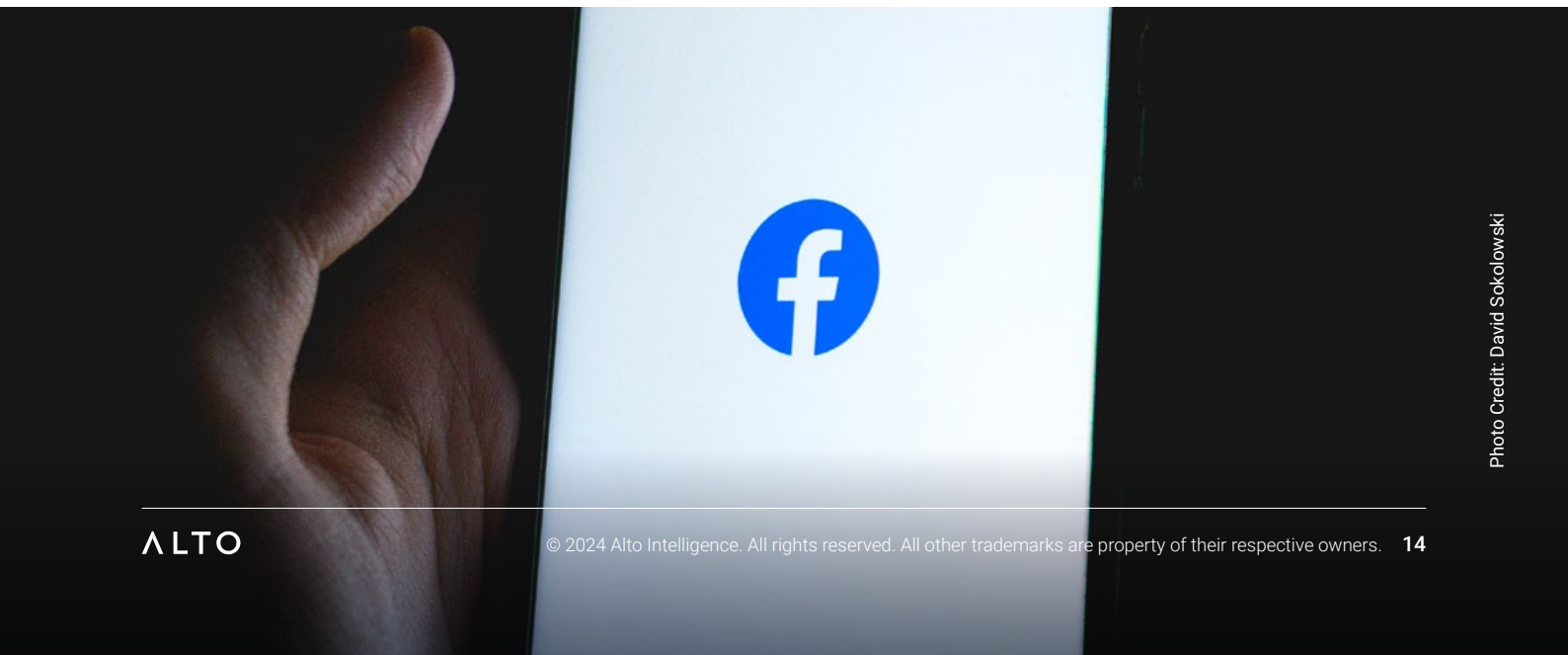
PENETRATION OF HIGH-ACTIVITY USERS PER COMMUNITY



The distribution of anomalous signals of behavior in communities sharing opposing views and often, antagonistic content demonstrates an important facet of the digital media ecosystem—synthetic or artificial amplification of debates does not always necessarily take the form of false narratives or information, but the strategic inflammation and amplification of polarizing positions within often complex sociopolitical conversations. Although further investigation is required to uncover relevant anomalies linked to the activity of these profiles, their impact on the debate and their ability to generate

relevant activity across the network demonstrate how the digital sphere and emergent narratives are subject to potential distortion.

Such tactics of high-frequency messaging are often employed to widely diffuse messages and content for digital marketing, activist campaigns, or other purposes. However, they can also be adapted to distinct contexts in which high volumes of activity can reshape, distort, polarize and heavily influence digital debates and perceptions of predominant narratives.



Analysis of Public Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp Groups

While Twitter is a very powerful proxy to understand public debate, narratives and intent, our investigation has demonstrated how Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp are extensively used by "smugglers" to organize illegal trips and offer falsified documentation. Facebook has a remarkable reach, where the groups in which these users offer commercial services amass more than 5.6 million members. Our analysis uncovers the several principal insights that will be detailed in the following section.

1. As indicated, the use made of each social network differs at a high level: while on Twitter, politicians, activists, journalists and NGOs dominate the conversation centered around refugee mistreatment and racism, Facebook and Telegram activity focuses on illegal travel to Europe via an established customer acquisition style funnel beginning with Facebook then moving to closed messaging channels like Telegram, WhatsApp, or telephone, targeting locals and individuals. Sales tactics like special offers, payment at destination, and others are frequently identified.
2. In Facebook groups, travel routes are reported, places to travel in convoys or boats are offered, passports or visas are sold, and tips are shared on what to do or what to learn upon arrival at the destination. Posts and content reinforce hope for a better life in Europe while ensuring travel safety.
3. Among the users offering these services, Alto's analysts have noted that their personal profiles are largely public and openly visible and accessible, enabling additional open-source data gathering and contextual analyses of incentives, motivations and links relevant to these actors. Around 40% of users identified selling passports on Facebook had publicly accessible profiles.

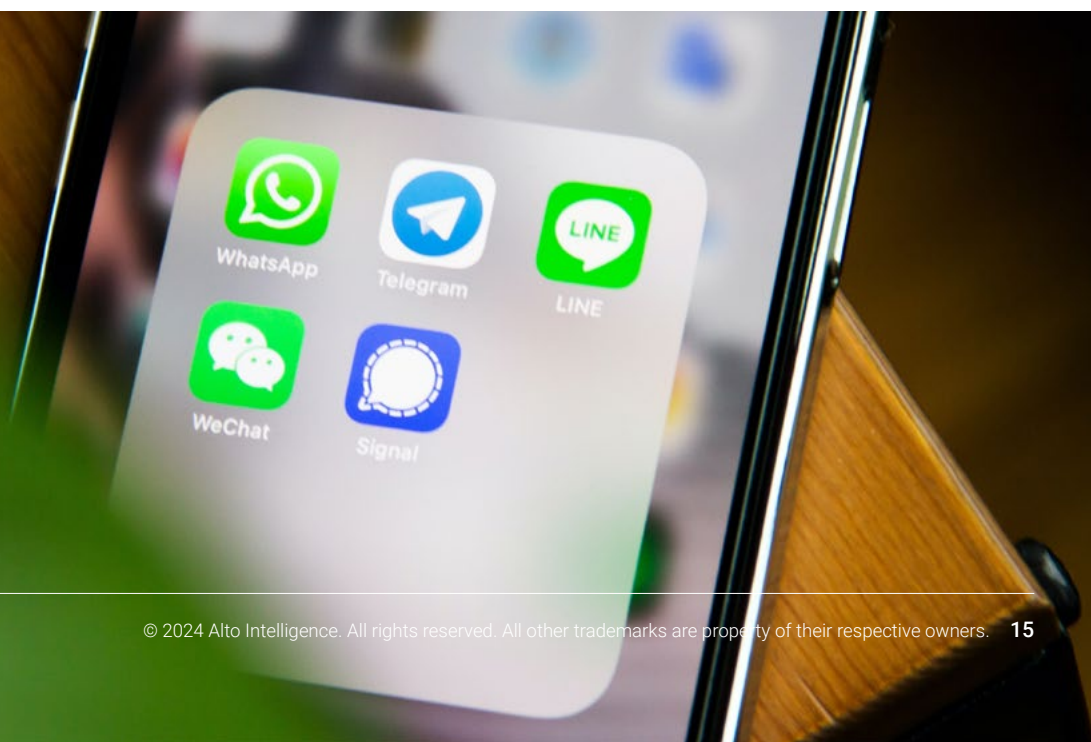


Photo Credit: Adem AY

Key Insights: Facebook



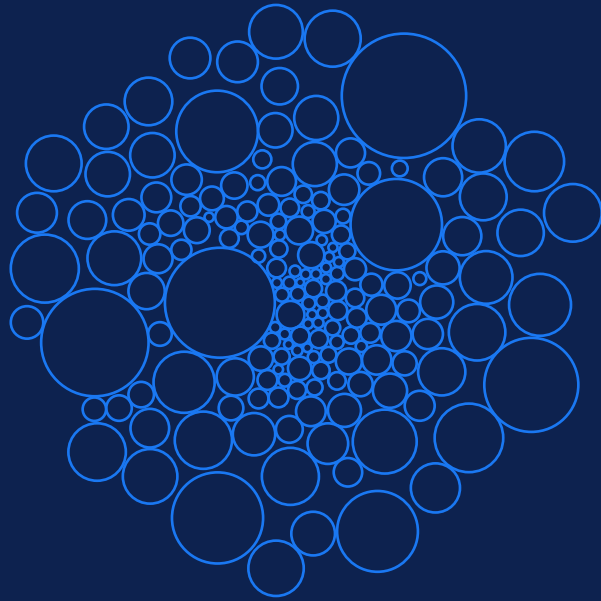
188
Groups of Interest



5.6M
Members



151
Users of Interest



151 Facebook users of interest are identified organizing and offering illegal travel or selling false documentation. Such “offers” achieve a great impact and visibility in these groups. 80% of these users offer trips and 20% offer forgeries.



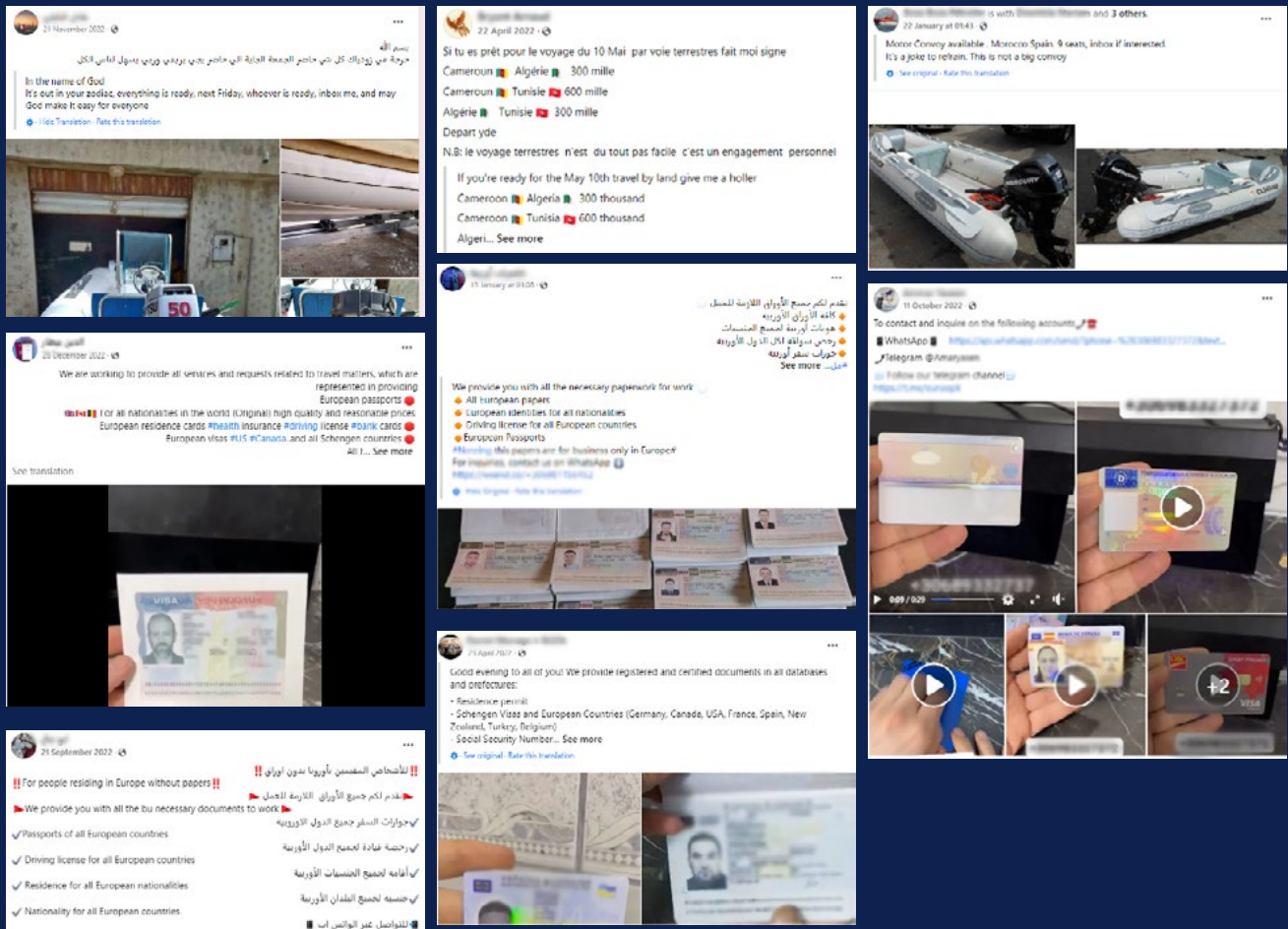
All of these users request contact by private message on the platform, and others mention other means of contact:

- 84 PHONE NUMBERS FROM 39 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES IDENTIFIED**
- 9 PRIVATE GROUPS ACTIVE**
- 5 TELEGRAM GROUPS ACTIVE**

Many of these users offer their services across multiple groups

Key Insights: Facebook

1. Many of the 151 users of interest identified offering illicit travel services are members of and offer services in multiple groups. 96 are in 2 or more groups, 49 are in 4 or more groups, and 11 are in 10 or more groups. One user of interest was detected in 22 different groups.
2. 80% of Facebook users of interest identified market illegal trips, in some cases with payment at destination or immediate departure.
3. 20% of public Facebook users of interest identified sell forged passports, visas, or residence documents.
4. It is important to note that close to 70% of these Facebook groups were created before 2022, some as early as 2014 and that they have avoided enforcement policies for years.
5. The gender segmentation shows that 16% of users interacting in the publications are women, and 84% are men.



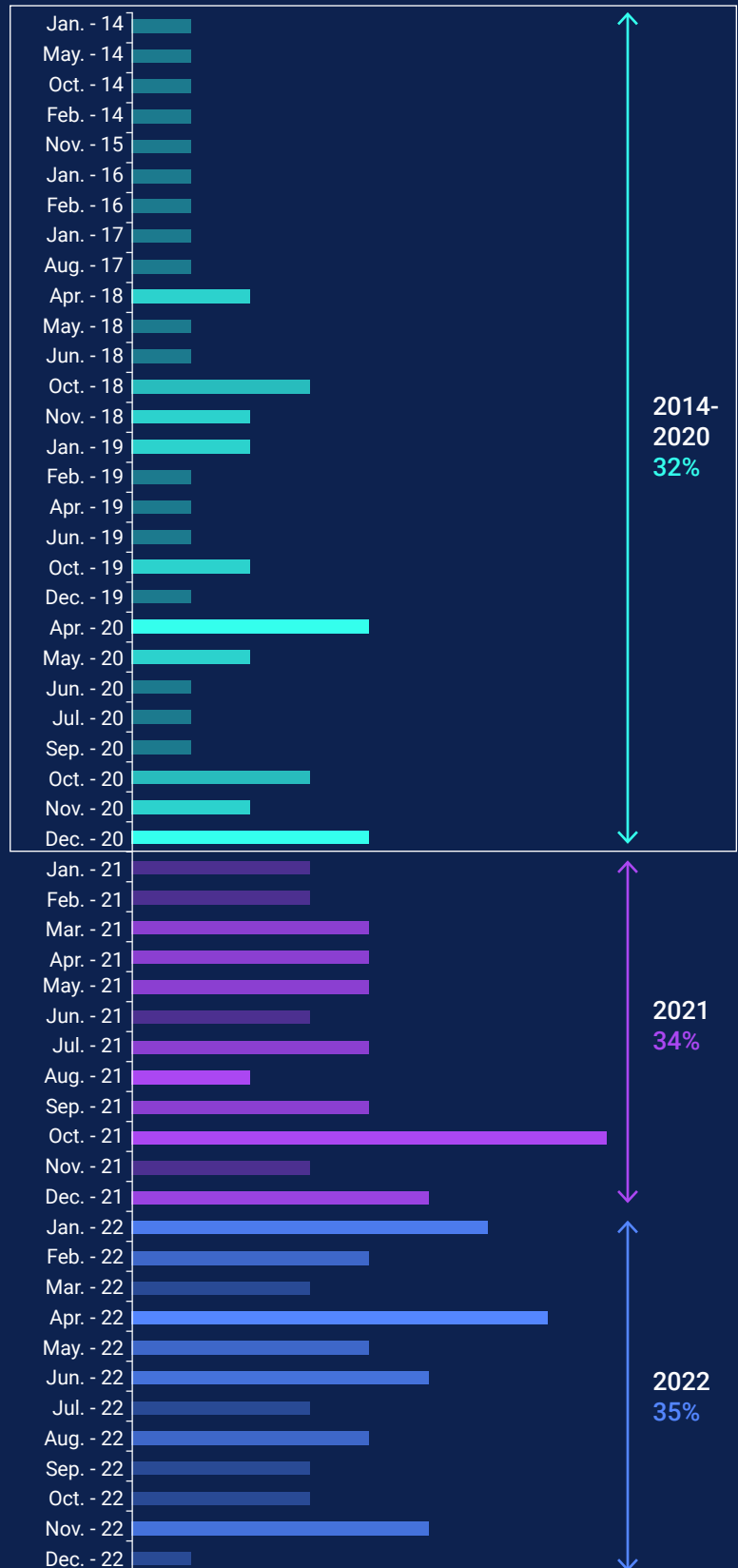
KEY INSIGHTS: FACEBOOK

Close to 70% of these Facebook groups were created before 2022, some as early as 2014, having avoided enforcement policies for years now.

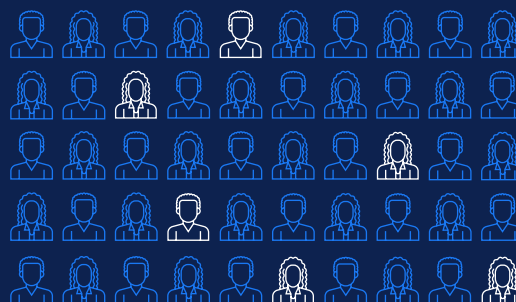
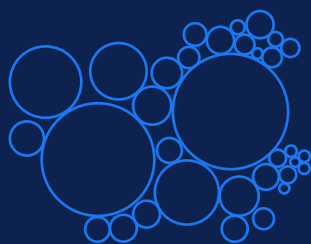
This trend evidences tactics of strategic profile and group creation or activation, which have been well documented as illicit groups or malign actors aim to capitalize on global trends, narratives, and key social or political events to capture and grow audiences to either:

A) monetize their engagement or participation in highly polarized debates, often related to inflammatory sociopolitical themes that gather significant audiences

B) influence opinion of targeted audiences ahead of key events (e.g. elections). Many of these groups may begin as benign, neutral, and generic focused on topics like gaming, sports, entertainment, or news and can be "repurposed", pivoting to the targeted diffusion of propagandistic narratives, as demonstrated in previous Alto analyses.



KEY INSIGHTS: TELEGRAM



33
Groups



132K
Members



The activity in these groups is similar to that carried out in public Facebook groups. Most of the groups identified have been active for less than one month, indicating a likely pattern of creation and deletion—either intentionally or by the platforms themselves.

On Telegram, groups in French focus on the forgery of documentation, while Arabic-language groups are linked to travel, especially via Turkey.

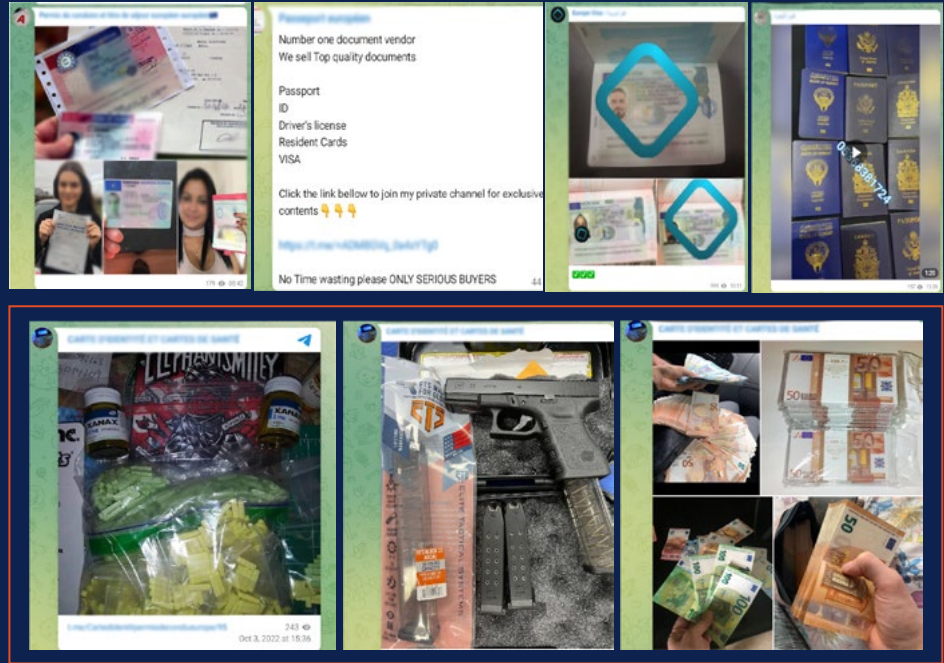


ALL GROUPS SHARE AT LEAST ONE PHONE NUMBER





57% of Telegram groups sell and trade passports, visas or residence documents. In one of the groups, arms and drug trafficking was identified.



43% of these users offer illegal trips, in some cases with payment at destination or immediate departure.



Travels from Moscow to Germany: price: 500 dollars
From Poland to Germany: 2500 dollars.
Travels by car from Germany to other European countries
Accommodations: 50 dollars/per night.
Client age between 20 to 40 years/ No women/ No children.



Travels from Greece To Europe/ from Vienna to Germany: price 800 euros/ From Turkey to Italy: price 8000 euros/ per person.



Travels from Istanbul to Serbia and to Athens via Thessaloniki, Greece: 30 min walking.



Travels from Istanbul to Serbia: walking 1h30, price: 4300 euros
Istanbul to Athens: walking 1h30, price: 4300 euros.



Travels from Istanbul to Athens: walking 30min, price: 4500 euros. This deal is available for 3 days.



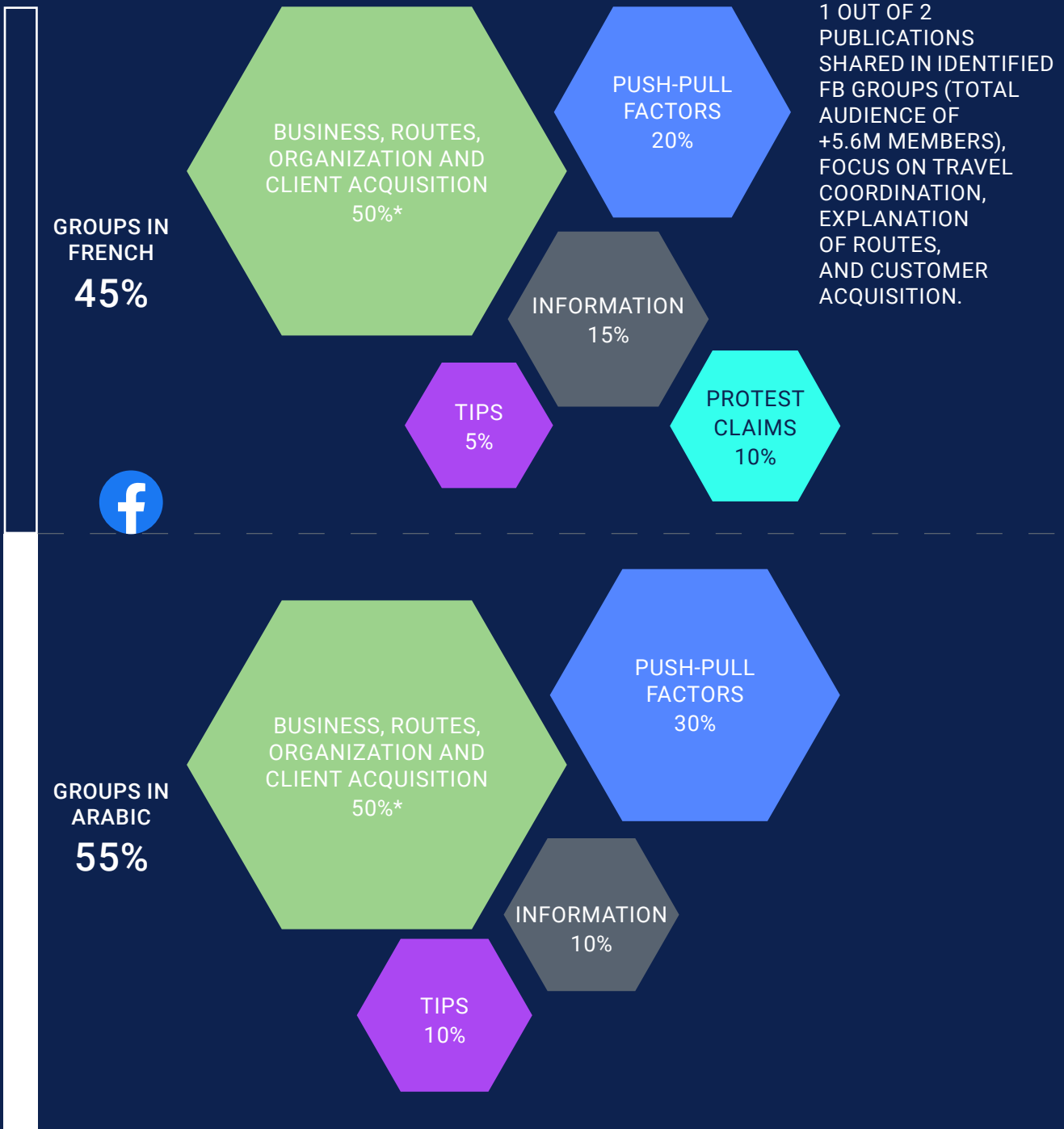
Trucks from Istanbul to Serbia and Athens.

KEY MIGRATION-RELATED NARRATIVES IDENTIFIED IN PUBLIC GROUPS

Business, Routes, Organization and Client Acquisition: Groups focused on commercialization of sea and land travel and sale of illicit documentation. Marketing and sales tactics including payment at destination, low availability, short notice periods, and quality of services are emphasized.

Push-Pull Factors: Groups emphasizing targeted push and pull factors to motivate and encourage their audiences to engage in illicit travel. Focus on the quality of life at the destination, substandard conditions in countries of origin, and reinforcing the safety of travel stand out.

Tips & Recommendations: Recommendations ranging from personal safety, avoidance of traffickers or scammers, tips for illegal border crossings, and legal procedures and cultural assimilation in destination countries are exchanged.



BUSINESS, ROUTES, ORGANIZATION AND CLIENT ACQUISITION: THE ROUTES AND TRIPS WHOSE GOAL IS TO REACH EUROPE PREDOMINATE. WHILE THE GROUPS IN FRENCH ARE LED BY THE MARITIME ROUTES, THE ARABIC CONCENTRATE ON LAND ROUTES VIA TURKEY.

GROUPS IN FRENCH

- 65% SEA TRAVEL**
Most sea routes seek to access Italy and Spain as main destinations. The leading routes cross from Morocco and Tunisia. To a lesser extent, trips of Algerian and Libyan origin, and destinations to France, are also present. Main routes:
 - Morocco to Spain.
 - Tunisia to Italy.
 - Mauritania to Spain.
 - Algeria to Spain.
- 20% LAND TRAVEL**
Land routes depart from Mauritania, Mali, Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, and Ivory Coast, towards Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. They then move to Europe by boat.
 - Land transportation routes start in Sub-Saharan countries to access Italy via Tunisia.
 - There are also mentions of the Turkish-Serbian route.
- 10% FORGERY AND SALE OF PASSPORTS, VISAS OR RESIDENCY CARDS**

GROUPS IN ARABIC

- 50% LAND TRAVEL**
The organizers of the illegal trips have established certain routes, mainly through Turkey:
 - From Turkey to Bulgaria or Serbia, and then to other European countries.
 - From Turkey to Bulgaria by trucks.
 - Land travel from Belarus to Europe by trucks
 - Land travel to Turkey first, and by plane to the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Belgium.
- 30% SEA TRAVEL**
Maritime routes departing from almost all coastal countries are mentioned, in order to get to Spain, Italy and France:
 - From Morocco, Libya, or Algeria to Europe.
 - From the Tunisian coasts such as Al-Mahdeya.
 - From Turkey to Europe, such as Italy and France in commercial ships
- 20% FORGERY AND SALE OF PASSPORTS, VISAS OR RESIDENCY CARDS**

KEY TACTICS

1 out of 2 comments from these groups offers trips by announcing departures and detailing routes, and selling false documents. The routes aiming to access Europe are predominant. Unsafe transport such as inflatable or fishing boats are the most frequently advertised.

Routes vary significantly by language:
In the groups in French, maritime trips are mostly shared, while travelling via Turkey is residual. In the groups in Arabic, Turkey is the gateway to Europe, especially when travelling by land.

Some psychological pressure factors and sales techniques used by those who offer the trips have been detected:

- Payment at destination is offered
- Short notice period when announcing the routes
- Low availability of places is claimed
- Giant and modern ships / yacht photos as bait



PUSH-PULL FACTORS: IN THE GROUPS IN FRENCH, THE INTENTION TO ENCOURAGE THE TRIP WITHOUT FEAR PREDOMINATES, WHILE THE GROUPS IN ARABIC SELL EUROPE AS A DREAM DESTINATION.

GROUPS IN FRENCH

75%

TRAVEL PULL FACTORS

Messages are used to encourage the idea of safe travel conditions, highlighting that:

- People safely arrive at their destinations.
- Those who arrive will receive humanitarian and medical aid at the port.
- If there are any problems, there will be NGO boats carrying out rescues.
- The boats are safe and equipped.
- The risk of traveling is worth it.

15%

PULL FACTORS

Messages are focused on visibility of positive conditions at the destination:

- Success stories of migrants who start their new lives in Europe.
- Favorable conditions at the destination.

10%

PUSH FACTORS

There are not many messages about the situation in the countries of origin, and they focus on:

- Escaping corruption, poverty, and the absence of opportunities.

GROUPS IN ARABIC

45%

PULL FACTORS

Europe is portrayed as a dream and migration as the road to happiness:

- Emphasizing Europe as a "dream" and "the road to happiness", with "lots of money and opportunities".
- Europe is worth the risk.
- Success stories

40%

TRAVEL PULL FACTORS

Messages are focused on travel safety and guarantee arrival to destinations :

- Videos and photos of successful arrivals to Europe or videos from inside the boats or trucks/cars showing smiling travelers.
- Travel safety regarding the boats. Smugglers showcasing the quality of their material.

15%

PUSH FACTORS

The main narratives about internal triggers include escaping poverty, the absence of opportunities, unfulfilled dreams, and a portrayal of North African countries as a prison.

KEY TACTICS

Due to the "commercial" style of these groups, the push factors driving the conversation are those whose goal is **creating hope for a better life in Europe and ensuring trips without fear**.

There are not many references to the situation in the countries of origin.

Among the **external push factors** those that stand out are **the pictures and videos of the "good life" that the immigrants in Europe have**.

In the groups in French, the intention to **overcome the fear of traveling** is what stands out, while in the groups in Arabic the focus is on selling **Europe as a dream destination**.

Most of the boat or vehicle images appear unreliable.



TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS: IN THE GROUPS IN ARABIC, REGARDING THE ROUTES ARE SHARED, SUCH AS HOW TO CROSS TURKEY’S BORDERS. WARNINGS ABOUT SCAMMERS OR UNTRUSTWORTHY SMUGGLERS ARE ALSO SHARED.

GROUPS IN FRENCH



RECOMMENDATIONS ON WHAT TO DO UPON ARRIVING

This narrative is smaller in volume. Concrete recommendations that were detected focus on guidance upon arriving at the destination.

- Suggestions for immigrants to keep in mind when starting their new lives.
- Tips regarding legal procedures such as applying for work visas.

GROUPS IN ARABIC



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TRIP

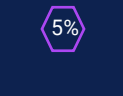
The dominant narratives in this section include tips on route recommendations:

- Route tips and prices.
- How to illegally cross the borders. Especially in Turkey and Serbia.
- Tips on what to pack for the trip (luggage, food, internet/phone).



ADVISING PEOPLE NOT TO DEAL WITH CERTAIN SMUGGLERS

- Advising people not to deal with certain smugglers who deceive and loot people's money or trick them by taking them on board in poorly constructed boats.
- The names and phone numbers of the smugglers or traffickers are posted in some groups.



RECOMMENDATIONS ON WHAT TO DO UPON ARRIVING

Messages on how to succeed in Europe and getting ready before immigrating were identified. Studying the destination's language or English, learning new skills, or obtaining other certifications is highly encouraged.

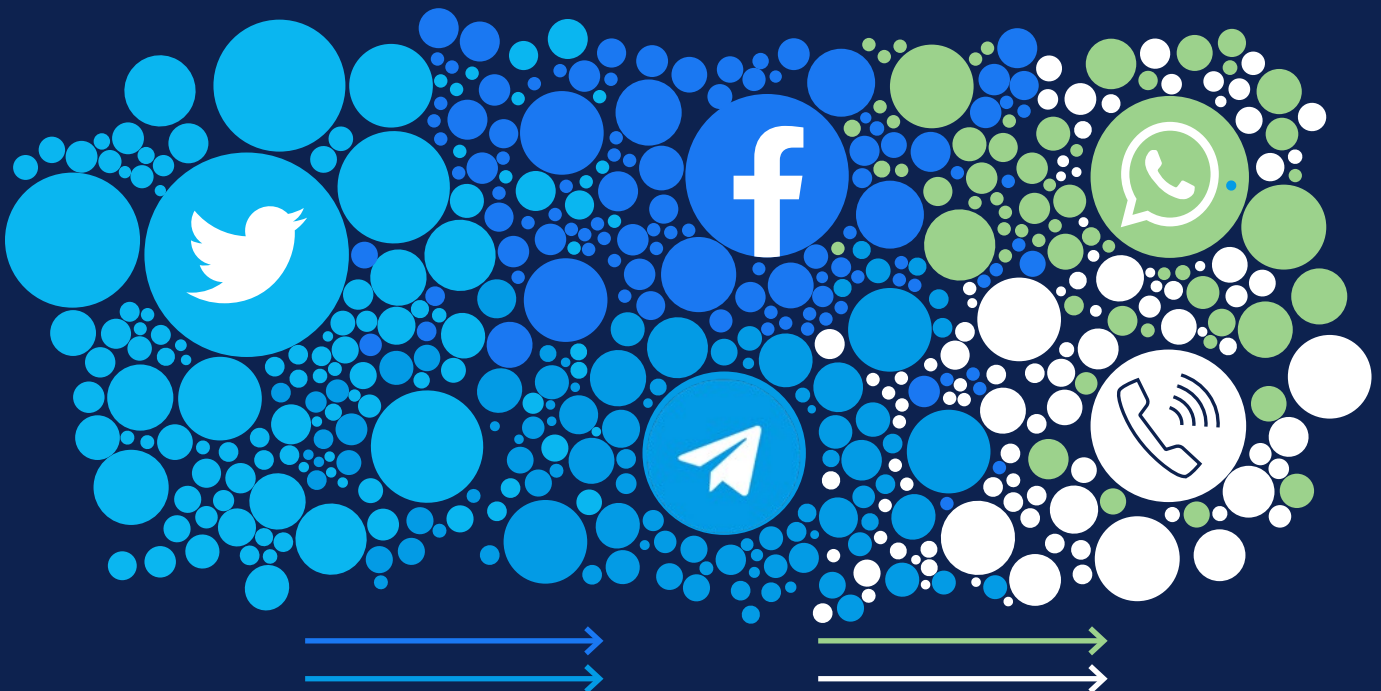
KEY TACTICS

More recommendations and tips are shared in Arabic groups.

Routes, border crossing advice, and alerts of scammers or traffickers, are shared, denouncing them by their **names and phone numbers.**

In the groups in **French,** content focuses recommending **practices and actions** to get integrated in the new country.

COMMERCIAL FUNNEL OF ILLICIT MIGRATION-RELATED DIGITAL ACTIVITY



Attribution of Actors Behind Illicit Activity

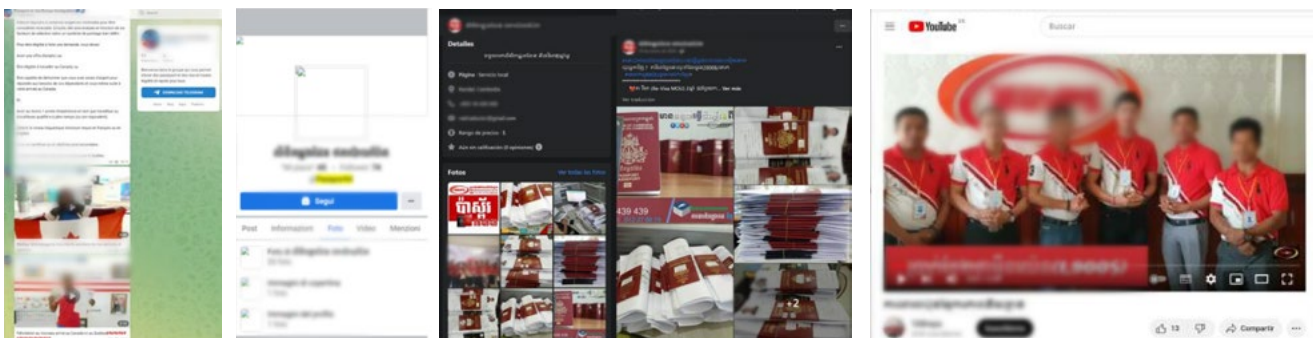
Alto's threat intelligence team investigated malicious digital activity by using Hunter, our proprietary tool that leverages the world's most extensive collection of curated breached, leaked, and exposed data (+124B breach records and +180B curated identity attributes from the surface, social, deep and dark web). Hunter enables rapid and agile investigations and supports the unmasking of threat actor identities, aiding in the discernment of the intent behind malign activity online.

Drilling into specific metadata and attributes captured and indexed through the previous analysis tied to domains, user profiles, monikers, and public groups involved in illegal activities, we have confirmed that the associated profiles are real individuals. Results indicate that, in some cases, those behind these groups bear multiple connections to forgery or illicit trafficking networks beyond the African continent, specifically in Europe and Asia, for example, we have been able to unmask a highly active forgery business operation based in Thailand, with ties to Malaysia and Cambodia, that is directly connected to illegal African migration networks towards Europe. This exercise

demonstrates the possibility of revealing networks of systemic and coordinated activity and exhibits the degree of specialization and segmentation of tasks within networks engaged in illicit activities.

This research has also confirmed that malign actors and groups are becoming more adept at concealing their involvement by:

- Implementing more operational security measures and utilizing intermediaries to distance themselves from user-facing activity.
- Migrating activity to apps and digital platforms with lower or none enforcement standards as well as aiming to drive engagement to off-platform domains as soon as possible or using nested strategies (driving traffic from one initial public group to others in simultaneous "jumps").
- Laundering messages through proxies to avoid detection. These include local media, non-governmental organizations or companies sometimes established and, in other cases, newly created in an ad-hoc fashion.



Conclusion and Further Research

This report analyzes a wide range of sources in multiple geographies and languages to illustrate the interconnected nature of our digital ecosystem, the interdependencies between public narratives, perceptions, and social phenomena, and the vulnerabilities that these realities present for the materialization of malign influence campaigns and hybrid threats.

While Alto's analysis evidences the prevalence of institutionally driven debate by actors on Twitter and news media, including politicians, activists, NGOs, citizens, and journalists, local conversations in this sphere also abound. In many cases, this activity profoundly reveals the motivations, frustrations, and perceptions that drive migration, and they often appear linked to structural challenges, including environmental degradation, climate, food insecurity, or sociopolitical instability. In other cases, geopolitical sensitivities are targeted and inflamed, as explained in the cases of North Africa.

Atop a debate characterized by different layers of institutional engagement and the diffusion of local/regional voices, this analysis describes how multiple platforms, channels, groups, and digital sources are influenced through targeted narratives with specific incentives. We identify a "funnel" of conversations and activity, often beginning with Twitter and Facebook and other digital platforms, that seeds and generates interest in the prospect of migration by disseminating targeted narratives. This model of audience capture focuses on developing trust by sharing information and reinforcing a rational and secure view of illegal immigration. While simultaneously

leveraging various touchpoints to generate and maintain demand, actors offering illicit services or documentation then directly engage with individuals on Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, or private telephone in what can be described as a "pre-final" step in the customer funnel. At the same time, migrants (treated as "potential clients") are actively engaged on social media to find information on routes, prices, documents, procedures, and more.

In this way, commercially incentivized actors take advantage of material vulnerabilities and legitimate challenges to engage in illicit activities, exacerbating the much-needed individual, social, and policy-level debates and multi-stakeholder interventions needed to address the complex nature of the African-European migratory phenomenon. By leveraging multiple digital touchpoints to propagate messages, disseminate targeted narratives, and subsequently optimize engagement, actors seeking to influence specific outcomes concerning African-European migration have demonstrated their ability to achieve such ends.

Our analysis has demonstrated capabilities for unmasking systemic and coordinated networks tied to individuals and corporate entities to map precisely how incentives influence intent and the interconnections of malign activity with different layers of the digital ecosystem. More research and resources are needed in this space to offer a more comprehensive and complete view of the multivariate relationships among different actors, channels, geographies, languages, and a multitude of other spaces and factors.

Real-time AI for risk, threat, and cyber intelligence proactive damage prevention

A global leader in investigative analytics, Alto Intelligence uses advanced algorithms and AI to analyze billions of real-time data points across surface, deep & dark web, heightening situational and operational awareness. With over a decade of development, Alto Intelligence's premium cyber intelligence toolbox swiftly detects early signals of high-impact events: know critical information first and respond confidently with our cutting-edge technology, employing generative AI and other unique proprietary analytical techniques.

From disinformation and deepfakes to hacktivism or social unrest, the line between online and real-world threats has vanished. At Alto Intelligence, we safeguard against reputational damage, geopolitical risks, hybrid threats, and security incidents in both domains.

[Reach out to us](#) for a demo to learn how Alto's approach can help your organization map, monitor, anticipate, and mitigate increasingly complex interconnected hybrid risks emerging from the digital sphere.

Why Alto

DATA ACQUISITION EXCELLENCE

Our extensive historical and real-time data lake enables our technologies and analysts to process billions of data points across a vast array of sources and formats. From breached data to news media, infostealers and more, our customers confidently identify and connect every piece of relevant data across the surface, deep, and dark web.

WORLD-CLASS ANALYST TEAM

Our dedicated interdisciplinary team of international data experts with diverse backgrounds in mathematics, data science, journalism, business, and cyber intelligence ensure consultancy-level insights by delivering best-in-class intelligence from an unmatched range of public, deep and dark web sources.

PROPRIETARY ALGORITHMS FROM EXPERTS IN GENERATIVE AI

Our unique technology empowers advanced analysis across the entire risk surface for superior anticipation, protecting organizations, their employees, and their critical assets. Because, the best way to overcome future digital threats is by facing them today.

Annex

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The following analysis focuses on activity in the digital public sphere, employing a multi-tiered methodology to index and analyze results from the digital public sphere—including social networks, news media domains, blogs, forums, and other public digital sources and communities from October 29th to December 29th, 2022. This analysis captures public activity and results in English, Arabic, French, Wolof, Bambara, and Hausa related to migration, prioritizing a detailed understanding of digital activity related to migratory routes toward Europe. Although Wolof, Bambara, and Hausa were unsupported by digital platforms such as Twitter and others, the analysis showed that the overall volume of content produced in connection with criteria from these languages was residual.

Further, the scope of this research captures activity in the specified languages geolocated in Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Libya, Tunisia, South Africa. Still, this means that non-geolocated users and content emerging from other geographies but engaging on African migration-related topics are captured within the scope of this analysis. As such, although major population centers play roles as transit countries, this approach ensures that volumes are adjusted to account for designated “priority countries” regarding established migration routes considering origins of travel and destinations towards Europe. The methodological approach considered the following key components:

1. Alto’s proprietary software and algorithms were used to index and capture conversations related to migration across online public platforms. Algorithms were employed to rank profiles by influence, based on the effectiveness of each author in spreading their messages—accounting for connections and proximity to other influential profiles throughout the network (e.g. Eigen-vector centrality like algorithms). Statistical outliers represented by anomalous levels of digital activity or other detected abnormalities (e.g. posting multiple messages in the same second) are also analyzed and mapped to gauge their influence and effectiveness in amplifying narratives and shaping the debate.
From the primary dataset, network analysis enables the identification and extraction of the most shared domains and content sources. Detailed analysis of how and where the content was shared can provide data and insights into which sources fuel different narratives and within which digital communities. Results undergo a process of interpretation, tagging, and synthesis to categorize influencers, themes, and domains within a classification taxonomy, enabling the comparison of proportions, volumes, and rankings of distinct typologies of diverse digital entities.
2. This analysis also conducts a deep dive into public Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp groups identified through an AI-assisted process enabling the identification of public groups and digital communities producing conversations on similar topics.

A recognized limitation to comprehensive open-source research is the restrictive data access provisions of most social media platforms, and the increasing popularity of closed, end-to-end encrypted channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and private Facebook groups, which are inaccessible to the digital tools and methods used by researchers to capture open-source data. While it is not possible to map all digital activity, it is generally acknowledged that conversations are usually not exclusive to anyone platform or domain, and any relevant narratives, content, trends, or signals with significant will become visible or eventually emerge across distinct touchpoints. The combination of sources and methodologies leveraged in this analysis offers a powerful proxy for public sentiment, opinion, and the detection of abnormalities within the digital sphere. Added to this is the size of the data set, which reinforces our confidence that this research provides a detailed picture of relevant conversations and digital activity within the period analyzed.

Key Narratives Emerging in the Public Digital Debate on Migration

COMMUNITY 1: FRENCH COMMUNITY AGAINST ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION *

- Criticism of the French government's policy toward illegal immigration and accusations of political figures not taking immigration seriously.
- Accusing NGOs of supporting and contributing to illegal immigration.
- Immigrants' behavior to reach EU borders.
- Accusing North African countries of Non-cooperation to return their illegal immigrants from France.
- Criticizing the number of illegal immigrants entering Europe in 2022.

COMMUNITY 6: WESTERN USERS CRITICAL OF IMMIGRANTS AND NGOS *

- Mistrust of NGOs.
- Allegations that immigrants are criminals.
- Deportation and military intervention.
- Questioning the concept of "refugee".

COMMUNITY 7: ACCUSATIONS OF VIOLENCE AND REQUESTS FOR DEPORTATION OF IMMIGRANTS IN EUROPE *

- Allegations that immigrants are criminals.
- Migrants cause trouble and destroy cities
- Anti-Islamic – racist narrative.
- Examples of blocked borders.

* Communities where false narratives and disinformation related to African immigrants detected.

COMMUNITY 2: MOROCCAN MEDIA ON ALGERIAN TREATMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

- Criticizing the Algerian authorities for deportations.
- Mistreatment and racism.
- Algerian hostility toward Moroccans.
- Describing the suffering of the Sahrawi refugees in the Algerian Tindouf camps.

COMMUNITY 3: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON DISCRIMINATION ISSUES FACING IMMIGRANTS

- Criticizing the mistreatment of immigrants.
- Issues of racism, and discrimination against immigrants in France.
- Islamophobia towards immigrants in Europe.

COMMUNITY 4: INTERNATIONAL NGOS FOR SEA-RESCUE MISSIONS AND MIGRANT SUPPORT NETWORKS

- Reports of insecurity in Libya.
- Accusations of institutional violence on immigrants.
- Accusations of the sanitary conditions on migrant boats.
- Deaths of migrants.

COMMUNITY 5: ALGERIANS ON MOROCCAN TREATMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

- Crimes committed by the Moroccan security services towards African immigrants.

COMMUNITY 8: ANTI-RACISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA ACTIVISM

- Criticizing racism and discrimination against immigrants.
- Racism and discrimination against Muslims.
- Accusing EU countries of not supporting immigrants.

COMMUNITY 9: PRO-MIGRANT FRENCH AND AFRICAN COMMUNITY

- Criticism of the EU for their border policies
- The suffering of migrants trying to cross European borders.
- News and messages about human trafficking, migrant smuggling.
- Climate change as a reason for people displacement.

COMMUNITY 10: ANTI-CONSERVATIVE COMMUNITY IN DEFENSE OF IMMIGRANTS

- Defense that immigrants do not steal jobs.
- Discourse against European colonialism.
- Justification of immigration due to climate change.
- Claims that companies take advantage of immigrants.
- Incidents related to Sub-Saharan immigrants trying to migrate to Europe.

COMMUNITY 11: WESTERN COMMUNITY CRITICAL OF US AND NATO

- Justification of immigration due to conflicts caused by NATO.
- Sub-narratives include:
 - Accusations of the West's role in the political and economic collapse of countries: especially in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq but also in the intervention in in 2011 or even the French occupation in Algeria up until 1962.
 - International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union and World Bank are accused of responding to neoliberal reforms that impact the food crisis in Africa.
 - Food embargoes cause starvation.
 - European countries accused of exploiting resources such as uranium in Niger.
- Accusations of institutional violence on immigrants.

COMMUNITY 12: FRENCH COMMUNITY CRITICIZING GOVERNMENT TREATMENT OF MIGRANTS AND DEFENDING THE "SANS-PAPIERS" IMMIGRANTS

- Defending the rights of immigrants and the "sans-papiers" in France.
- Complaints against the French government.

COMMUNITY 13: NIGERIAN IMMIGRANTS' COMMUNITY

- Contextualization of immigration due to climate-related causes.
- Border conflicts.
- Justification of immigration due to conflicts caused by NATO.

COMMUNITY 14: INTRA-AFRICAN IMMIGRATION CONVERSATION

- Explanation of immigration as climate-driven.
- Explanation of immigration as insecurity - or instability-driven.
- Explanation of immigration as driven by racial/ethnic issues.

**COMMUNITY 15:
SAUDI-ARABIAN ANTI-
RACISM COMMUNITY**

- Criticizing racism and discrimination.
- Criticizing the situation of migrants in Libya.
- Migration flux between Italy and Tunisia.
- Internal conflict between Egypt and Libya.

**COMMUNITY 16: LIBYAN
MEDIA SPREADING
IMMIGRATION -RELATED
NEWS**

- Dangers of human smugglers in Libya.
- Accusing the EU of not receiving illegal immigrants.
- Egyptian immigrants in an illegal situation in Libya.
- Terrorism and other issues on the Libyan Chadian border.
- Illegal practices of illegal migrants in Libya.

**COMMUNITY 18:
INTERNATIONAL NON-
PROFIT REFUGEE ADVOCATES**

- Justification of immigration due to climatic causes.
- Accusations of institutional violence on immigrants.

**COMMUNITY 17:
IOM AND UN ACTIONS FOR
THE PROTECTION OF SUB-
SAHARAN MIGRANTS**

- Awareness projects to improve migrants' lives.
- Reports of human rights abuses.
- Smuggling and trafficking news.

**COMMUNITY 19:
TUNISIAN COMMUNITY
DEFENDING IMMIGRANTS**

- Issues facing Tunisian migrants in Europe.
- Defending the Tunisian authorities in dealing with immigration.
- Accusing the Tunisian authorities of mistreating immigrants and of causing the death of immigrants in the Mediterranean.
- Promoting and justifying the right of immigration.

**COMMUNITY 20:
BRITISH COMMUNITY IN
DEFENSE OF MIGRANT'S
RIGHTS**

- British community in defense of migrant's rights.
- Justifications of migratory flows from Senegal as a product of climate change.
- Mistreatment of refugees in Libya.
- Mistreatment of immigrants in the UK.
- Protection and humanitarian treatment of asylum seekers.