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Who Belongs Beyond the Border?
Narratives and Counter-Narratives of Migration in Southern European
Border Societies.

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La doyenne
Kristina Schulz

P.O.
E. Dupont

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Abstract

My PhD project has set to study how narratives of migration are constructed, spread, and challenged in moments of crisis, starting from the core understanding of narratives as shaping imaginaries, influencing policy making, and defining the boundaries of belonging. It demonstrates how narratives are not merely descriptive devices but constitutive forces that shape governance and the possibilities for more inclusive societies. Grounded in the nccr – on the move broader project *Narratives of Crisis and Their Influence in Shaping Discourses and Policies of Migration and Mobility*, it contributes to existing research and debates in four ways: conceptually, methodologically, empirically and normatively. Conceptually, it refines the understanding of “crisis” and “narratives of migration” by developing a multilevel, reflexive framework that moves beyond methodological nationalism and situates bordering processes within broader Mediterranean histories, imaginaries, and power relations. Methodologically, it combines qualitative and computational approaches to capture how narratives are produced, spread, and challenged across diverse actors and locations. Empirically, it offers a quite comprehensive analysis of narrative production in Italy and Spain – during moments of crisis but not solely – drawing on seven empirical studies that examine political actors, media, civil society, and migrant activists across both physical and non-physical borders. Finally, the project makes a normative contribution by foregrounding the political and ethical stakes of narrative production: it shows how dominant narratives shape belonging and in/exclusion both in imaginaries and practices and sheds light on alternative perspectives articulated by migrants and some actors of civil society.

Keywords: Migration narratives, Crisis claims, Bordering processes, Belonging and in/exclusion.

Résumé

Mon projet de thèse étudie comment les récits de migration se construisent, se diffusent et sont remis en question en période de crise, en partant du principe fondamental que ces récits façonnent les imaginaires, influencent l'élaboration des politiques et définissent les limites de l'appartenance dans nos sociétés. Il démontre que les récits ne sont pas de simples outils descriptifs, mais des forces constitutives qui façonnent la gouvernance et ouvrent la voie à des sociétés plus inclusives. Basé sur le projet plus large du nccr – on the move intitulé *Narratives of Crisis and Their Influence in Shaping Discourses and Policies of Migration and Mobility*, cet ouvrage apporte une contribution aux recherches et débats existants de quatre manières : sur le plan conceptuel, méthodologique, empirique et normatif. Sur le plan conceptuel, cette étude affine la compréhension des notions de « crise » et de « récits de migration » en développant un cadre réflexif à plusieurs niveaux qui dépasse le nationalisme méthodologique et situe les processus frontaliers au sein des histoires, des imaginaires et des relations de pouvoir méditerranéennes au sens large. Sur le plan méthodologique, il combine des approches qualitatives et computationnelles pour saisir comment les récits sont produits, diffusés et remis en question par divers acteurs et dans divers lieux. Sur le plan empirique, il propose une analyse assez exhaustive de la production narrative en Italie et en Espagne – en période de crise, mais pas uniquement – en s'appuyant sur sept études empiriques qui examinent les acteurs politiques, les médias, la société civile et les activistes migrants, tant au-delà des frontières physiques que non physiques. Enfin, le projet apporte une contribution normative en mettant en avant les enjeux politiques et éthiques de la production narrative : il montre comment les récits dominants façonnent l'appartenance et l'inclusion/l'exclusion tant dans les imaginaires que dans les pratiques, et met en lumière les perspectives alternatives exprimées par les migrants et certains acteurs de la société civile.

Mots-clés : Récits migratoires, Crisis claims, Bordering processes, Appartenance et inclusion/exclusion.

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List of abbreviations

CDA — Critical Discourse Analysis

CSOs — Civil Society Organizations

EU — European Union

FRONTEX — the EU's border and coast guard agency

IAOs — Independent Activist Organizations

IOs — International Organizations

MMN — Migration and Mobility Nexus

NATO — North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGOs — Non-Governmental Organizations

POC — People of Color

PRR — Populist Radical Right

Chapter 1. Why so Scared of a Jungle?

In Spring 2022, I laid eyes for the first time on the project description of the nccr on the move Phase III project “Narratives of Crisis and Their Influence in Shaping Discourses and Policies of Migration and Mobility”. It not only stimulated me to apply but also urged me to be part of this project, as I believed it touched upon extremely urgent questions regarding the implications of narratives and of their effects on our ideas of development in societies, of democracy, of citizenship and belonging.

Fast forward a few months: October 2022, I started my journey as doctoral researcher in Neuchâtel on my dream project. I am spending time reading and writing about narratives, their function, the way they are constructed: I am living a dream. On the 19th of October 2022, reading the news, I noticed the report of a speech made by the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the previous week at the European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges: “Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that the humankind has been able to build – the three things together [...] The rest of the world is not exactly a garden. Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden” (Liboreiro, 2022). This specific part of the speech had much echo and was considered not only controversial, but outrageous and racist with media outlets such as Al Jazeera reporting titles such as “Josep Borrell as Europe’s racist ‘gardener’” (Bishara, 2022). This instance made me realize I was onto something in my motivation to pursue research in the field of narratives and the meaning that these create in societies. It proved once again to me how such speech acts shared by powerful figures and largely mediatized spread specific imaginaries in our societies. The metaphor shared by Mr. Borrell on that date conveyed the idea of an idyllic European continent whose organization and equilibrium could be destroyed at any time by menaces coming from the *jungle* beyond its borders. Borrell explained in the aftermath of the scandal that he was referring to the geopolitical conditions of the world at the time, that his metaphor was misinterpreted, outlining that the term *jungle* was used to visualize the lawlessness and disorder that currently rule world politics. The many global crises were depicted as beyond Europe, as disconnected to the essence of Europe which, in his perspective, overcame this lawlessness through the project of the Union, whose order can today be put to test and potentially destroyed.

Such a metaphor narrating the idea of the European continent as a garden was defined as a Eurocentric statement with damaging consequences by The European Network Against

Racism (Sanaullah, 2022). In October 2022, in a political climate of growing popularity of radical right populism across Europe, demonstrated by the election victory of Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy in Italy (Roberts, 2022), amongst others, such statement by such high political representative felt quite unnecessary if not highly concerning. Moral of the story? The weight of words should not be underestimated. If there is a brief and accessible manner to summarize the work I conducted in the last four years of research is that words are never just words and they carry history, legacy and many implications from their continuous use and reproduction. This statement can perhaps appear banal to some of you readers, I understand, but it hides more meaning than you might think. My work is surely not a call to overthinking and mental exhaustion trying to constantly find the right words to describe a situation, but rather it is a call to try not to overlook words' history, legacy and their many implications, such as the ones cited above.

My doctoral journey was driven by this understanding of narratives as far from neutral. Narratives shape imaginaries, influence policy making, and ultimately define the boundaries of belonging. To study them is not simply to analyze text, but to uncover power structures, histories, and legacies embedded within this text. This project has therefore been an intellectual pursuit as well as an effort to understand how narratives mold societies, and how members of these societies might resist or reproduce them. As a result, my project was guided by research questions exploring the way migration is narrated in two border societies of the European continent, more precisely: how is migration narrated in the border societies of Italy and Spain? Do moments of crisis have an impact on narratives of migration? Which are the actors whose narratives can be considered mainstream and dominant, and which are the actors whose narratives propose alternatives to mainstream dominant ones? When looking at migration narratives in moments of crisis I mainly look at border crisis which occurred on the two countries' borders in the area of the Western and Central Mediterranean Sea. Border societies, in this thesis, refer to social and political communities within EU member states that are located at the edges of the European project, and are therefore constructed as liminal spaces between Europe and what lies beyond it. They are shaped by their proximity to EU external borders (part of their territory), by the bordering practices enacted there, and by the narratives that frame them as frontline states when narrating immigration at the EU level.

I clarify that I do not see a hierarchical difference between mobility and migration, which does not mean that such a hierarchy does not exist in the world we live in. In fact, mobility is often used to refer to movements of people that might be perceived as temporary and fluid, while migration gives the idea of something more long-term and permanent

(Hategekimana et al., 2024). Mobility is often perceived more positively than migration. In this dissertation, I use movement and mobility as broader concepts that encompass what is generally referred to as mobility – people moving from relatively close locations for a more restricted period of time – and migration – people moving internationally and aiming to stay in the receiving country for a longer period of time. When referring to migration in this dissertation, I mean the migration flows narrated by the chosen actors and crossing the chosen borders of the Western and Central Mediterranean. Thus, migration is considered here as international migration across the western and central Mediterranean, as the dissertation investigates the narratives of this specific type of movement (you can see that movement is intended as a broader concept that encompasses migration). I am indeed looking at border processes that physically and non-physically divide people who belong to two European countries at the intersection between Europe and what lies beyond Europe, so it is the narrative of migration and migrants that I am interested in. These are also the terms utilized by the actors whose narratives I analyze. I use migrants and people on the move interchangeably in this dissertation, and my aim is to underline that migrants are people on the move: they are first and foremost people, human beings, that are/have recently been on the move.

Thus, my doctoral dissertation presents the analysis of narratives of migration and people on the move in so-defined crisis contexts in Italy and Spain. Its aim is to analyze the cases within these geographical boundaries first separately to then present comparative insights gained in the course of these four years. You will notice that one article presents the comparative analysis of the narratives within the context of Italy, Spain, and Portugal. This article was one of the many successful collaborations that I undertook in these four years and aimed at drawing more general findings in the Southern European context. The dissertation is composed of nine articles. Two of them are of conceptual nature, thus positioning and refining the conceptual framing when approaching the project. The remaining seven are of empirical nature: two of those look into Italy and two into Spain, while a total of three showing the comparative effort of the dissertation. Despite the national state being present in the justification of the selection of these cases, my dissertation presents a clear effort in detaching my research from a framework usually permeated with methodological nationalism – the comparison is placed within a Mediterranean region rather than between two national states in the European context. Therefore, I draw on key reflections in recent studies on the way the Mediterranean region has often been investigated as strictly linked to the imaginary of national states (Chambers, 2008; Isabella & Zanou, 2016) – the predominant attention to the collection of national states artificially fragmenting the region and the methodological nationalism's approach to the

Mediterranean having contributed to biased perspectives on the history of this region. The effort is not completely to disregard methodological nationalism as a framework, but rather to show that there are alternative useful ones, especially when analyzing regions considered as border regions. Indeed, while my dissertation reflects on non-physical bordering and its role in narratives, four of the articles composing it focus on the context of physical borders in the Central and Western Mediterranean Sea.

The table below lists the papers composing my dissertation, giving details regarding their nature, geographical scope and study type. These papers' methodology of data collection and analysis is outlined in detail in Chapter 3, Methodology. Given the collaborative nature of my PhD work, enabled by the broader intellectual environment of nccr, I underline that the conceptual reflections presented in this dissertation have been inspired by the work and discussions at the network level. Nevertheless, the specific analytical framework adopted in this dissertation, including the claims-based approach to narratives, the refinement of the "crisis as claim" framework, and the integration of temporal and normative dimensions of narratives, is my own contribution to these debates. Methodologically, all analytical and procedural decisions in the empirical articles are my own: I worked at the research designs, defined the analytical categories, developed the coding and interpretive procedures, and determined how the different qualitative methods were combined and applied to the empirical materials. In two cases (Empirical Articles I and IV), the development of the qualitative methodology was carried out collaboratively with my co-authors, but the analytical design and interpretive decisions presented in the dissertation reflect my own contribution. In one case (Empirical Article III), the mixed-method approach was implemented jointly with my co-author; however, the overall design of the mixed-method strategy was mine.

Table 1. illustrating my dissertations' articles

Title	Format	Nature	Geographical Scope	Study Type	Research Question
Crises, Migration and (Im)Mobility: Towards a Reflexive and Multilevel Approach	nccr – on the move working paper	Conceptual	—	—	What is Crisis? How does the concept intertwine with migration and (im)mobility?
Crises as Claims	SocAxIV paper Resubmitted: <i>Political</i>	Conceptual	—	—	How can crisis be conceptualized in a way that is

Title	Format	Nature	Geographical Scope	Study Type	Research Question
	<i>Science Quarterly</i>				efficient and helpful to social sciences and humanities?
‘A tale of two cities’: Migration and resentment through the eyes of shopkeepers in Lombardy	Journal article published in <i>Ethnicities</i>	Empirical	Italy; non-physical bordering processes.	Comparative	How is im-/emigration narrated in two Italian urban contexts? What is the role emotions have in the way we narrate migration?
Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro’s Activism in Italy	Journal article published in <i>Current Issues in Migration Research</i>	Empirical	Italy; physical and non-physical bordering processes.	Single Case	How can migrants resist dominant narratives of migration and become societally and politically visible subjects in receiving societies?
Distrusting ‘them’ and creating ‘us’: migration and the uses of the past by populist radical right parties in southern Europe	Journal article published in <i>Frontiers in Political Science</i>	Empirical	Southern European Scope (Italy, Portugal and Spain); non-physical bordering processes.	Comparative	How is im-/emigration mobilized in manifestos of Southern European Populist Radical Right Parties?
Shaping European Borders Beyond Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Two Spanish <i>Borderscapes</i>	nccr – on the move working paper	Empirical	Spain; Borderlands in Central & Western Mediterranean (MedThinking); physical and non-physical	Comparative	What do two Spanish borderlands’ current development tell us about EU/Spanish perspective and

Title	Format	Nature	Geographical Scope	Study Type	Research Question
			bordering processes.		governance on migration? What are the future implications?
Framing Migration and Migrants Through Border Crises: The Case of Ceuta and Melilla	Journal article published in <i>Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies</i>	Empirical	Spain; Borderlands in Central & Western Mediterranean (MedThinking); physical and non-physical bordering processes.	Single Case	What is the framing of migration and people on the move on the Spanish-Moroccan border? How do moments of crisis at the border have an impact on this framing?
Narrating crises of Europe's southernmost <i>borderscapes</i> : the case of Melilla and Lampedusa	EuroMedMig Working Paper Series' Working Paper	Empirical	Italy and Spain; Borderlands in Central & Western Mediterranean (MedThinking); physical and non-physical bordering processes.	Comparative	How do mainstream media frame migration in the chosen geographical border contexts in moments of crisis?
The Border Remembers: Civil Society's Commemorative Acts in the Mediterranean Borderlands of Melilla and Lampedusa.	Resubmitted to: <i>Journal of Borderland Studies</i>	Empirical	Italy and Spain; Borderlands in Central & Western Mediterranean (MedThinking); physical and non-physical bordering processes.	Comparative	How does narrative evolve through time? What is the role of commemorative acts in the narrative of crises at the border?

I outline here an overview of the structure of this dissertation: in this first part, Part I, Chapter 2. presents an overview of the main concepts (Section 1. Narratives; Section 2.

Narratives of Migration; Section 3. Narratives of Migration in Moments of Crisis; Section 4. Narratives of Migration in Times of Crisis in Border Societies, elaborating on the meaning of physical and non-physical borders and bordering processes within societies, and Section 5. elaborating on the actors that create and share migration narratives); Chapter 3. goes into details on methods of data collection and analysis together with a reflection on the process of writing a thesis by article and on the creation of a knowledge transfer project within it; Chapter 4 is dedicated to the summary of each article composing the dissertation and a discussion aimed at showing the connection between them. In Chapter 5, you will find the dissertation's conclusion, my attempt to bring forward a normative reflection. Part II of this dissertation reports the collection of articles, consisting of the full (seven published and two submitted) versions of the articles and my knowledge transfer project "Thinking Outside the Border". Part I of this dissertation presents the main concepts I have worked with in the course of these four years, namely narratives, migration, crisis, bordering processes, and the actors who mobilize them. The sections presented in Part I are not separate domains of the dissertation, they are analytically interdependent. Narratives (and their embedded claims) provide the structure through which meaning [of migration] is created; bordering processes define the spatial and symbolic arenas in which narratives operate; and actors mobilize narratives [of migration] to construct and contest boundaries of belonging. This interrelation forms the analytical thread that connects the conceptual framework, the empirical articles, and the normative reflection of the dissertation.

But what exactly do I want to argue through this work? Narratives of migration not only describe movement of people but have a role in constituting the boundaries of democratic membership. The work presented argues that narratives have a normative component, define the scope of democratic responsibility and are produced and contested across multiple actors and scales. Institutional, media, and civil society actors (including migrants themselves) generate competing narratives of the phenomenon and show how potential conflicts over meaning are created. This dissertation argues that the very presence of conflict over meaning (counter-narratives) is what advances transformative and democratic processes in our societies.

This dissertation presents four types of contribution: conceptual, methodological, empirical and normative. Conceptually, it refines the understanding of "crisis" and "narratives of migration" by developing a multilevel, reflexive framework that moves beyond methodological nationalism and situates bordering processes within broader Mediterranean histories, imaginaries, and power relations (see Chapter 2). Methodologically, it combines qualitative and computational approaches to capture how narratives are produced, spread, and

challenged across diverse actors and locations (see Chapter 3). Empirically, the dissertation offers a quite comprehensive analysis of narrative production in Italy and Spain – during moments of crisis but not solely – drawing on seven empirical studies that examine political actors, media, civil society, and migrant activists across both physical and non-physical borders. Finally, the project makes a normative contribution by foregrounding the political and ethical stakes of narrative production: it shows how dominant narratives shape belonging, exclusion, and policy, while also shedding light on alternative perspectives articulated by migrants and some actors of civil society. Together, these contributions demonstrate that narratives are not merely descriptive devices but constitutive forces that shape governance and the possibilities for more inclusive societies.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Narratives

What are narratives and what are their functions in societies? Narrative has been conceptualized as “a story with a temporal sequence of events unfolding [...] that culminate in a moral to the story.” (Jones & McBeth, 2010: 329). As such, narrative presents definitions of heroes, villains, and victims, a moral of the story, and implied solutions. Within narratives, there are claims which present a moral and often imply a solution even when not explicit because they assert what it is right [to do, to say] and in this resides their power to prescribe what it is right and what is wrong, what is normal and what is not. Thus, narratives present claims of what is right and what is wrong and advance a normative argument, what Jones and McBeth (2010) define as “moral to the story”. These morals to the story present in narratives explain already one of their crucial functions: creating a shared meaning and making sense of an extremely complex and overwhelming reality. Narratives have both cognitive and emotional functions: they help understand a complex situation and create a sense of collective sharing of that situation (Boswell et al., 2021). This collective sharing of that situation gives the accepted reading of the situation: this collective sharing (accepted by the collective) is thus normalized and seen as legitimate vis a vis other understanding of the same situation. The two functions have also been considered as combined: in fact, narratives have been defined as capable of “influencing our ability to recall events, motivate people to act, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure or problem-solving capabilities, and ultimately perhaps even constitute our very identity” (Casebeer, 2005: 9).

This capability of “influencing” has also been broadly investigated by scholars and theorists, specifically looking at actors and their ability to manipulate meanings and norms in societies. Literature focusing on the media and their politics has discussed this manipulative aspect of narrative communication. In fact, media have been investigated as platforms on which a specific idea of reality or ideology is presented in a way that makes it sensible, rational and reasonable to the public (Boswell et al., 2021). As a result, these narratives – representations of specific ideas of reality – can influence policy change. Political scientists have analyzed the function of narratives in supporting specific policy processes and the role of policy actors in the creation and usage of narratives to get closer not only to the public but also to stakeholders and decision makers at the governmental level (Boswell et al., 2021; Shanahan et al., 2011). Jones and McBeth (2010) investigate the ways in which narratives can be used strategically by policy actors to highlight issues and create increasing coalitions, maintain those coalitions and

potentially re-shift the relevance of an issue to restructure coalitions. As a result, policies can be perceived as “translations of beliefs that are communicated through policy narratives” (Shanahan et al., 2011).

One additional function of narratives analyzed in the literature – perhaps the one often perceived as most relevant and controversial – is their construction of historical memory. The clearest example of historical memory construction is to be found in nation-building and nationalism (Somers & Gibson, 1993). This construction shapes the meaning of collective history and identity, resulting in the symbolic conceptions of “Self/Us” versus “Other/Them” (Boswell et al., 2021; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Sahin-Mencutek, 2020). This specific use of narratives categorizes and distinguishes reality and its content and clearly marks a boundary between things, people and norms in society. As such, narratives aid in creating, maintaining, and destroying differences and boundaries in society. These boundaries are legitimized by narratives that thus aid in deciding who belongs to a specific system and who does not, who is included in and who is excluded from the system and, consequently, who has access to civil, social and political rights of such system (Boswell et al., 2011, 2021; Hellgren, Page & Sealy, 2025). Narratives thus exert normative influence in shaping the perspectives of individuals who can rely on this normative influence on shaping narratives. Individuals are both shaped by narratives and shapers of narratives (Boswell et al., 2021).

Literature has also investigated how narratives are spread, on top of their function, and how they come to have an impact, be persuasive and emerge above other kind of narratives (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 2004; Jones & McBeth, 2010). Creation and spread of narratives can be implemented by a range of diverse actors – media outlets, policymakers, experts, civil society organizations – each with the potential of contributing to the amplification, reframing, or silencing of a narrative. Scholars – when focusing more on policy narratives – claim that narratives that go beyond banality, introducing a changed perspective have the most impact and are to be considered the most persuasive (Jones & Radaelli, 2015). While other analyses focused on narratives in media and argue that a narrative in the news needs to be “good news” to emerge: “good news” must be told with dramatization, negativity and unexpectedness which often result into simplistic and stigmatizing narrations of events (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Gans, 2004). Scholarship has also analyzed “media hypes” which refer to sudden attention given to specific events. These events receive an extensive amount of attention and coverage not only because of initial interesting characteristics but because they are specifically targeted by media outlets after noticing their peculiar popularity. The specific event is thus made newsworthy by the triggered attention resulting in its high popularity (Boswell et al., 2021; Wien & Elmelund-

Præstekær, 2009). An interesting way in which narratives are spread is analyzed in media studies through the conceptualization of “subversion myths”. These myths explain why things are going wrong, why established customs and traditions seem to be threatened and, consequently, who is responsible. “Subversion myths” identify a scape goat, that could be groups or individuals, which is responsible for evils. These myths are usually accompanied by “atrocious tales”, actual or imagined events narrated with the aim of mobilizing support for a specific cause. This mobilization would create action and a sense of outrage towards those – individuals or groups – defined as responsible for evils – the scape goats (Boswell et al., 2021; Bromley et al., 1979).

a. Processes of Categorizations

Narratives, as mentioned above, present definitions of the reality that surrounds us. Narratives organize meaning through definitions. To define, narratives inevitably organize reality into categories. The use of categories has been defined as unavoidable both in everyday interactions, in the analysis of such interactions, and more generally in the analysis of the social (Mason, 1990; Modood, 1988). In everyday social life, political action and academic analysis, categories are essential: without them, it would be impossible to discuss and analyze social and political life as “every social encounter involves the use of categories” (Mason, 1990, p. 128). Importantly, not all categories are the same and perform the same effects. Categories and the processes through which they are created are distinguished in scholarship into self-group identification, which takes place among those inside a specific boundary, and categorization, which is a process of external definition (Jenkins, 2000). Through the latter process, categories can be imposed, coercive, or fit the self-designated ones. It is generally believed that self-designated identities should always be preferred over an externally imposed category (Mason, 1990; Modood, 1988; Rex et al., 1986). Thus, the scholarly tradition investigating categorization processes has debated the usage of categories, their meaning and power. Mason (1990) reflects on the difference between category and identity, underlining how unavoidable it is for human beings to be labelled in descriptive categories that do not always prescribe their identity. In such cases, “categories of people may be specified with no implication that they share an identity or are members of a social group.” (p. 125). However, in other cases, categories might be chosen because they coincide with group identities or, in the sphere of political action, categories might be claimed, on moral or strategic grounds, to embrace a common identity and create a more powerful and visible social and political group: in these cases, the relationship between category and identity is less clear cut (Mason, 1990).

In (re)formulating the relation between identity and category by Mason (1990), Jenkins (2000) made an important distinction between the “internal and external moments of the dialectic of identification” (p.7). He defined the internal moment as “the self/group identification” and the external moment as “categorization”. The former happens within the boundaries of a group while the latter takes place from the outside, through external definition. The two are interdependent and relational, as the process of defining an “Us” implies the creation of a “Them”, while external definitions of “Us” affect their internal definitions. More importantly, “established internal definitions may provide a defense against the imposition of external definitions. Thus, categorization may strengthen existing group identification through resistance and reaction.” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 9).

Scholars have underlined categorizations’ consequential and performative nature (Jenkins, 2000; Mason, 1990; Modood, 1988, 2010) which is found, consequentially, in the narratives utilizing performative categories. They participate in creating normative prescriptions of how interactions amongst humans – social and political life – should be and should develop. Narratives containing specific categorizing claims by influential actors shape situations, provide them with a social representation and recognition, and frame policy responses. The formulation and implementation of policy by states, supra-national bodies and non-governmental organizations contribute to and are shaped by categorizing claims contained in narratives (Jenkins, 2000). More importantly, categorization is dialectically implicated in group identification, as a group that is categorized can in fact internalize the categorization making it an element of its self-identification, but can also resist it. Jenkins (2000) argued that even when the categorized resists categorization, this is internalized as “striving for autonomy of self-identification is every bit of an effect of categorization. The rejected external claim is internalized, but paradoxically, as a focus of denial” (p. 21).

The performative force of a categorizing claim depends on the power and social visibility of the actors that foster them. Claims formulated by powerful actors gain more visibility in society and public opinion and are more likely to go through the above-mentioned internalization processes (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). Scholars disagree when evaluating the consequences of external categorization. For some, external categorization is always negative (i.e. morally problematic, given its implication on individual self-determination) and coercive. For others, the inevitable interconnection between group self-identification and categorization makes it difficult for the former to take precedence over the latter, as it might be influenced already by the latter, consciously or unconsciously (Jenkins, 2000; Mason, 1990; Modood, 2010). But even if we consider that categorization does not always produce stigmatization and

oppression and can also be positive and valorizing, it is established that it is a way to maintain self-esteem through intergroup differentiation, particularly through stereotypes (Hagendoorn, 1995). Even when valorizing, attributing an external categorization puts individuals and groups categorized in a subordinate and passive position, while through self-identification the same group can become subject in the process of *vizibilization* and its modalities.

Attributing external categorization is in fact asserting that some group or individual is X without reporting perspectives from self-identification processes. While any group can externally categorize others – sometimes even to reinforce its own self-identification – these dynamics are not symmetrical. Groups with greater access to places of visibility have more potential to get their categorizations amplified, spread, even normalized in public discourse. As a result, their external categorizations become more widely socially received. While accepting that categorization is unavoidable in the social world, when looking at marginalized groups that lack representation, claims reporting external categorization restrict opportunities for free and autonomous self-identification of the marginalized group: marginalized groups do not lack a voice because they are not capable of a self-identification process, rather because such processes are not given visibility in society. As recognition theorists assert, self-identification must be recognized by the external societal world to be effective. Given the dialogical constitution of identity, we need the “Other” to know how we self-identify (Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 2019). It follows that to allow for the constitution of a recognized group identity, fair conditions of voice, power, and autonomy are needed to avoid misrecognition and oppression (Young, 1990). In order to understand how inter-group hierarchies are built and preserved in societies, some scholars have introduced the notion of societal bordering. According to this perspective, marginalized groups are often categorized through narratives that claim these groups as non-belonging. External categorization’s bordering logic can deny agency, subjectivity, and audible voices to the groups/individuals that it categorized. However, radical democratic theorists have argued that, in established democratic regimes, everybody is capable of political subjectivation and marginalized groups, in particular, are important agents of contestation and change of regime (Balibar, 2004; Rancière, 2004).

The point here is not to describe or prescribe what members of marginalized groups should do in order to be part of the system and transform it, but rather to emphasize that the very existence of marginalized groups opens a window of proposition of alternative claims building up alternative narratives and resulting in contestation of the established order, which is ontologically structured by conflict. As, according to Balibar’s concept of *equaliberty*, individuals “emancipate themselves” as “no one can be liberated by another” (2014: 308), only

self-identification developed by the marginalized can emancipate them. By shaping their own narrative, marginalized groups gain political subjectivation (Rancière, 2004). Rancière's theorization is not far from Lyotard's (1979), according to whom, since narrative has the potential to become knowledge that may not or cannot be challenged by an audience receiving it, narratives need to be resisted through alternative perspectives. Narratives, which carry specific categorizing claims, convince of their intrinsic truth all those interlocutors that do not share alternative perspectives of the narrated story: these alternative perspectives can create one – or more – counternarrative(s), actively challenging a narrative. In absence of counternarratives, a narrative can become the ultimate truth to an audience (Lyotard, 1979).

When categorizing claims are embedded in narratives told by more or less powerful actors – states, institutions, media, or civil society – they do not merely describe groups but actively shape how those groups are perceived, recognized, and governed. In this sense, narratives function as performative vehicles: they translate categories into lived realities by prescribing norms of belonging, exclusion, or valorization. When marginalized groups are narrated primarily through external categorization, their voices risk being silenced, as the imposed story frames them as passive objects rather than active subjects. Conversely, when groups construct and circulate counternarratives rooted in self-identification, they reclaim agency, contest dominant categorizations, and open space for alternative visions of social and political life. Thus, the struggle over categorization is inseparable from the struggle over narrative, since it is through narrative that categories acquire meaning, legitimacy, and power. In this sense, this thesis does not disregard narratives as also political instruments. As we saw when introducing embedded claims, narratives by political actors can strategically frame events, claim crises, and assign responsibility in ways that reflect these actors' interests, and ideologies. Actors with institutional and media visibility and agenda-setting capacity have the potential to create narratives that become dominant, as Conceptual Article II "Crises as Claims" will outline by looking at claims of crises within narratives.

b. How to study narratives?

Narratives have been studied through different methodologies which tell us a lot about how they are composed practically. Scholarship has inquired about frames constructing narratives and/or the centrality of the choice of words and gesture through critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis (Ambrosini, 2025; Bassi, 2018; Cuttitta, 2014; D'Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Insulander, 2019; Khosravini et al., 2012; Mitić, 2018; Pajnik et al., 2016; Vigo, 2018). In the scholarship around narratives, political speeches (Ambrosini, 2025; Pajnik et al., 2016), institutions' and media narratives (Cusumano & Bell, 2021; Cuttitta, 2014; D'Amato &

Lucarelli, 2019; Mitić, 2018; Vigo, 2018) have been dedicated preponderant attention. In political speeches, in particular, critical discourse and semiotic analysis have been extensively utilized to look at speech acts within narratives. Speech acts, a concept found indeed mainly in scholarship utilizing semiotic analysis, are what linguists define as “central units of communication, with phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties” (Green, 2017) through which a speaker forms statements. In the investigation of the process of construction of narratives, scholarship has given attention to what in semiotic analysis is described as the addresser, who refers to a specific audience, the addressee, with a specific message. This specific message is conveyed through the speech act and goes to construct a specific narrative. Through the speech act, series of messages are conveyed that go construct a specific narrative.

Critical discourse and semiotic analysis, often in contrast with a framing and content analysis of narrative, are not only concerned with the message conveyed in the speech acts but also on the how this message has the potential to be conveyed more effectively. In this light, narratives are not only constructed by messages that report specific words and their meanings, but they are also constructed by devices utilized to share these messages such as repetitions and figures of speech (such as similes, metaphors and metonyms). Indeed, according to how studies methodologically approach narratives, narratives come to be conceptualized more in detail in different ways. There are approaches that analyze narratives looking at the words used to convey the story, while others engage in the way in which these words are conveyed.

Talking about conveying narratives, it is crucial to underline that, despite narrative analysis often overlooking emotions in its investigations, “narratives are inextricably emotionally structured” (Bloch, 1996; Greco, 2008; Kleres, 2011: 183). Emotions are important characters in the play of the creation and spread of narratives which shape our social and political meanings (Marino & de Athouguia Filipe, 2025). Emotions are found at the lexical (words) and syntactical (sentences) dimensions of narrative: at the former, lexical level, critical cognitive linguistics (Kleres, 2011; Schwarz-Friesel, 2015) have shown how words can refer descriptively to emotional states through their lexemes (words composed of the lexemes of fear, concern, dread might well be conveying the emotion of fear, for example), how some words can be modified so that they convey specific emotions through, for example, diminutives and augmentatives and/or evaluative pre/suffixes and the crucial role of interjections (Kleres, 2011). At the latter, syntactical level, emotions can be expressed through entire sentences: the role of figure of speeches such as metaphors and metonyms within entire sentences to convey specific sentences has also been studied by linguistic scholars, but also through a more interdisciplinary

approach (Fussell, 2002) using methods such as critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. Critical discourse analysis in particular has proved efficient in analyzing aspects that are not only related to words and their meaning, but also to how the words are pronounced and accompanied by which gestures, facial expressions and rhythms (Cap & Hart, 2014).

Indeed, researchers might consider other forms of narrative that are not words or act of speech, but rather symbolic and visual (Ayata et al., 2024; Gabrielli & Varela-Huerta, 2024; Gabrielli, 2025). In this sense, symbolic/ritual acts created and shaped through time are also narrative. Evolving narratives in the form of speech acts and rituals can also be considered narrative and studied as such, for example. Studies developed by historians on commemorative acts, for example, have analyzed commemorative acts as narrative of events evolving through time focusing on and emphasizing the national-state role (Blight, 1989; Dwyer, 2004; Jedlowski, 2001; Mininni et al., 2013; Sumartojo, 2016; Winter, 2006). Research has thus treated commemorative acts as means to construct and reinforce national identity. In this dominant framework, memory is understood as a selective reconstruction of the past shaped by present needs, mainly the needs of the national state, and it is usually framed as historical memory of the national state, produced through struggles over meaning and legitimacy. Consequently, most studies on commemorative acts analyze events which took place in a more remote past and tied to national histories, such as wars, battles, treaties and mainly interpret these acts as generalized narratives serving the construction of the national state. Even when civil society or subnational groups appear in the literature, their commemorative acts are often analyzed in relation to national narratives rather than as autonomous forms of collective meaning-making (Horsti, 2023; Horsti & Neumann, 2019; Sumartojo, 2016).

Yet commemorative acts as narrative are not inherently national. They are speech and symbolic acts linking individuals to a community – any community – which try to make sense of past events, whether distant or recent. What gives commemorative acts more generally a relevant role in society and its development is not the remoteness of the events remembered through them rather their potential to create social bonds, articulate grief, and mobilize recognition (see the studies of Foster & Woodthorpe, 2012 and Jimeno, 2011).

c. Narrative conceptualized in this dissertation

What is clear from this review of the literature on narrative is that a study of narrative has to be interdisciplinary: from cognitive linguistic to history to social and political sciences, a study of narrative, the expression of our social life, must be interdisciplinary. And, drawing on such rich, interdisciplinary literature on the concept of narrative, what is the adopted conceptualization of narrative in this dissertation? I adopt the conceptualization of narrative as a story to make sense

of what surrounds us with a moral, as Jones & McBeth (2010) suggest: this story is told through claims which have the aim to define, better categorize, what surrounds us (in order to make it comprehensible to us). Narrative has the ability to create the categories through which social life becomes intelligible and in this stands its constitutive force. In this dissertation, I focus on claims within narratives, how they present subjects (e.g., victims, threats, responsible actors), within specific situations (e.g., a crisis, an emergency, a humanitarian tragedy) where they communicate moral expectations/what appears normal/appropriate and what does not. By examining claims in depth, I show how narratives create specific social categories and imaginaries. While broader factors such as audience reception, authority, or the nature of narrative diffusion have a key role in how narratives are shared and then received, the empirical chapters concentrate on the constitutive nature of claims within narratives, namely what terms they use to define situations, assign responsibility, and articulate normativity, by presenting what is normal or unacceptable. A narrative is composed of categorizing claims which present what reality is in order to make it understandable. These claims can also imply the rightness or wrongness of this reality, the observable status quo. In fact, as I introduced, narratives are those stories that introduce a moral and, as such, they contain normative claims regarding a status quo, a situation, a reality described. This conceptualization of narrative entails that narrative has two dimensions which are its functions as well: one that is descriptive (aimed at the comprehension of reality) and another that is normative. Despite the table below outlining them as separate (for illustrating purposes), these two dimensions are intertwined and inextricable from one another.

Table 2. Narrative dimensions, components and functions

Dimension	Components	Function
Descriptive	Narrative → Categorizing claims → Comprehension	<i>To define and categorize reality so it becomes understandable.</i>
Normative	Narrative → Normative Claims → Moral Evaluation	<i>To judge reality by introducing moral claims about rightness/wrongness.</i>

Narratives, according to this conceptualization, thus contain categorizing claims and, as a result, bring forward processes of categorization. Categorizing claims are considered, here, consequential, namely they have effects in society, and performative, namely they are characterized by the performance of a social or cultural understanding of reality. Table 3 below exemplifies the understanding of categorizing claims contained in narratives.

Table 3. Characteristics of Categorizing Claims Contained in Narratives

Characteristic of Categorizing Claims	Description	Implications
Categorizing/Defining	Claims define and classify reality into understandable categories.	Shapes how individuals and groups perceive and organize the world.
Consequential	Claims have effects in society.	Influence policies, social norms, and collective behavior.
Performative	Claims enact or perform a cultural/social understanding of reality.	They do not just describe reality but also reinforce or challenge meanings.
Narrative/Normative	Embedded within stories that make sense of surroundings with a moral. Here, categorizing claims become normative.	Narratives both explain and evaluate reality, guiding moral judgments.

The categorizing claims embedded in narratives can be uttered – spoken, written, illustrated, and visualized. The fact that the first thing that we think of when we reflect around claims is the concept of words and text does not mean that narratives – and the claims within them – cannot be communicated in other ways. In this dissertation, the conceptualization of narrative also draws from approaches mainly developed in cognitive linguistics which underline the importance of emotions in the creation and spread of narrative. In addition, an important aspect taken into consideration in this dissertation is the role of narratives evolving through time and, as a result, the investigation of commemorative acts (through speech and symbolic acts) as narrative. The rich understanding of narrative and a focus on the potential of its components demanded richness and diversity in methods of data collection and analysis when using narrative as my object of study due to the potential of the concept itself and due to my specific choices. I delve deeper into methodological choices in my research project in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. The next section of Chapter 2 delves deeper into existing research around narratives of migration, to then outline the importance of the concept of crisis and elaborate on the geographical scope and the nature of the actors investigated in this dissertation.

2.2 Narratives (and some of their implications for governance) of Migration

Narratives concerning the phenomenon of migration have been widely studied and, in particular, ones reported in media and by powerful political actors (Boswell et al., 2021; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Bruno, 2016; Gemi et al., 2013; Horsti, 2016; Hellgren, Page & Sealy, 2025) and mainly in the context of governance, namely migration governance narratives (Triandafyllidou, 2025). Starting with media, research has shown how their representation has had a significant contribution in the creation of narratives of migration and migrants that are widely socially shared (Bello, 2022b; Bruno, 2016; Valente et al., 2021). Scholars have investigated the presence of frames categorizing migrants – and refugees as part of the broader group of migrants – in media. Three migration frames are the most present in narratives of migration in media: threat frames (which focus on jobs, public order, fiscal and national cohesion), victim frames (focused on global economy, humanitarianism and racism/xenophobia) and hero frames (invoking themes of the good worker, cultural diversity, and integration) (Benson, 2013). As a result, migrants are often categorized as *enemies*, *victims* or *heroes* (Benson, 2013; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Horsti, 2016; Mitić, 2018). Research has shown that governments and institutions in the EU hold information campaigns employing both enemy and hero categorizations through a strategic emotional and dramatic media narrative stressing the danger of migrating to Europe and depicting the worthiness of those staying in their country of origins (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018). The role of the *enemy* is ascribed to racialized and criminalized migrants – often Muslim and/or people of color (POC) – and by refugees represented as economic or public order threat – with the accent on their number. However, refugees are often also framed as victims, while migrants reflect the role of heroes when they enthusiastically adopt the mainstream culture of the majority and civic obligations in the receiving countries (Benson, 2013). In Western countries' media there seem to be a predominance of other two representation frames: a negative, alarmist one concerned with illegality, crime and the draining of power resources of the receiving country and one frame that depicts migrants as passive victims in need of protection (Gemi et al., 2013; Valente et al., 2021). A visual analysis of media, investigating the photos they choose to report, also shows the use of threat, victim, or hero frames (Pogliano, 2018) and an obsession with the theatricalization of migration at the border, especially looking at images from the Mediterranean sea (De Genova, 2013; Gabrielli, 2025). Gabrielli (2025) elaborates on the importance of strategic choices in *visibilizing* migration flows on specific borders underlining how representations of larger group of people where faces are not recognizable show lack of individual identity, triggering fear rather than empathy.

a. Narratives of securitization

Studies investigating narratives of migration have reported the presence of a prominent narrative of securitization, linked to the negative and alarmist frames of migration and to the categorization of the migrant as enemy, which has been extensively investigated by the literature, focusing on national and supranational cases. Narratives of migration in European media – but not exclusively – appear to have become increasingly stringent and securitized. The most identified frames are the humanitarian and securitarian ones – the latter depicting migration as a matter of public order. Media studies have found an increasing normalization of anti-immigrant framing in newspapers, showing the predominant presence of the securitarian frame (Boswell et al., 2021; Chouliaraki, 2012; D’Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Randy S. Clemons et al., 2020). While narratives with the aim to shift towards a more humanitarian approach prevalently depict migrants as victims, without a subjectivity and agency of their own (Chouliaraki, 2012; D’Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Valente et al., 2021).

The role of securitization of migration in media narratives appears to have become increasingly relevant from 2015 onwards – after what has been defined as the European migration “crisis” occurred. Scholars showed how what some European political actors narrated as “invasion” remained far below the much larger numbers of people on the move taken in by Lebanon, Jordan, or Turkey from 2015 onwards (Lavenex, 2018). The so-called “invasion” “constituted less than 0.2 per cent of the EU’s total 510 million population; and concentrated in six EU countries, leaving the majority unaffected.” (1196). Dines et al. (2018) reflected on the use of migration and refugee “crisis” vocabulary not only to describe an objective state of affairs – which is disrupted – but as a political tactic (Dines et al., 2018). Scholarly debate has questioned the use of a predominant narrative of a “crisis” of migration that involved the EU, supposedly threatening its borders and causing disruption in its neighborhood (Bitschnau et al., 2021; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021b; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Dines et al., 2018; Laine, 2020; McAdam, 2014; Mountz & Hiemstra, 2014; Squire et al., 2021). Over the course of the last 10 years the connection between economic and financial crises and the number of people moving towards the European continent has become increasingly present in narratives of migration (Dines et al., 2018; Fröhlich, 2017). Indeed, the most recent link between the movement of people and crisis is clearly analyzable looking at what has been defined as the European migration “crisis” of 2015 reported by European media through a simplistic and dehumanizing approach and a mainly Eurocentric perspective (Dines et al., 2018).

Research has shown that EU media coverage of migration flows towards the EU from the African continent and the Middle East has at times been simplistic and fostered

disinformation. As highlighted by Teye (2022), for example, “although media images and political narratives tend to suggest that there is mass migration from West Africa to Europe, a majority (i.e. 72%) of migrants from West Africa have been migrating intra-regionally.” (p.74). In addition, looking at the same case study, it appears that Europe is considered the most popular destination only outside the African continent and that, more importantly, European countries’ increasingly restrictive migration policies and better availability of employment opportunities in some Asian countries have recently resulted in a shift of migration flows from the EU to the Gulf region (Teye, 2022). In addition, Dines et al. (2018) underline how Eurocentrism in media fosters ignorance and disinformation when portraying the 2015 migration crisis as the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War – overlooking, among many other refugee flows that did not always directly involve the European continent, the vast majority of internationally displace Syrians residing in the Middle East. Lastly, the literature clearly reports how “[...] the greater part of international migration takes place within the Global South.” (Dines et al., 2018, p. 442)

While European political and organizational fragility appears to have a role in this process of problematization of migration in narratives, this link of migration with crisis and disruption has lately come to be construed as a protracted experiential condition and therefore posits a “epistemological impasse” (Dines et al., 2018, p. 441) in the understanding of migration. However, whether objective state of affairs or constructed narrative, linking migration and people on the move to disruption and crisis has deep consequences in, for example, shaping the experiences of people on the move. In fact, “[...] face value acceptance of crisis narratives canacerbate the tendency to view and manage migration according to binary divisions, such as integration versus segregation, modernity versus cultural backwardness, the deserving versus the undeserving or the common contrived dichotomy between refugees and economic migrants.” (Dines et al., 2018, p. 441). Securitizing narratives of migration highlight the importance of borders and identity – both referred to the national state and the European continent as a whole and normalize the perspective on international migration as a phenomenon that is driven by or brings disruption and crisis.

Movement is narrated differently depending on the migration flows we examine. Different media outlets have different standards when it comes to narrating movements from different parts of the world: what research has concluded, as outlined in this section, is that migration flows towards Europe crossing the Mediterranean have often been securitized in European mainstream media narratives. The lenses of the migration and mobility nexus, challenging distinctions between “migration” and “mobility” and showing that such distinctions

are a product of political, economic, and racialized hierarchies, connect very well to the conducted research on mainstream media narratives regarding migration flows in the Mediterranean. The MMN framework highlights that movements associated with European citizenship, for example, tend to be portrayed as “mobility,” neutral or even at times desirable (economically) form of circulation, whereas movements associated with racialized non-European people on the move are narrated as “immigration,” and become easily problematized and securitized. Media frames can play a role in stabilizing this hierarchy. Through repeated visual and discursive patterns, media report on this type of “immigration” as a phenomenon requiring surveillance, management, or alternatively, rescue.

b. Actors narrating migration at the national and intergovernmental levels

While media are a key actor to look at when studying narratives and its spread, existing studies further focused on political figures and parties at the national level (Agnew & Shin, 2019; Bello, 2022b; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021a, 2021b; Kaufmann, 2018): scholarship researching policy texts have looked at the strategic use of migration narratives by political leaders. Research has focused on populist parties’ – and mainly radical right populist parties – narratives of migration, which exploit situations of emergency to advance extreme nationalistic claims (Agnew & Shin, 2019; Bello, 2022b; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021a, 2021b; Kaufmann, 2018; Kymlicka, 2016). Right wing or nationalist populists through their native understanding of “the people” territorialize sovereignty identifying threats coming from outside to the borders threatening the domestic space of the nation (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021a, 2021b; Kaufmann, 2018). According to Casaglia & Coletti (2021b) in fact, “borders offer a crucial site where to explore processes of territorialization of threats and security issues in nationalist populist discourses and practices.” (p. 2). Right wing nationalist populists tend to speak in territorial terms, identifying a clear “Us” against “Them,” a “good” against an “evil,” to be able to construct scapegoats to blame for societal disruptions of modern times. Casaglia & Coletti (2021b) investigate the role of borders in populist narratives related to migration. Indeed, populists appear to have a special attachment to the idea of taking politics to the people and framing people in an entirely native territorial sense (Agnew & Shin, 2019).

National state borders play a crucial role in these narratives as the national state is the frame of reference and “[...] maintains or reasserts sovereign control over its laws institutions and the terms of its international interactions” (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021b, p. 4). Other studies, for example one developed by Kirkwood (2017), have investigated how refugees are humanized in contrast with other type of people on the move in parliamentary debates on the European

refugee “crisis”, reinforcing consequently processes of othering and the understanding of migration as a binary phenomenon where some are deserving to move and some are not.

Narratives of governance of migration are the result of processes of national state identity creation, processes which generate a dominant understanding of what the nation is – and how migration is understood in this national context – and who belongs and who does not. As a result, these narratives do not emerge in a natural way, but they are constructed through such processes, privileging specific explanations around migration and people on the move explanations which require specific calls for action (Triandafyllidou, 2025). In addition, as elaborated by Triandafyllidou (2025), not only national but also transnational governance efforts in the field of migration contributed to a dominant narrative of migration as safe, orderly, and regular, narrative where the wishes and needs of Western receiving countries and their perspectives take advantage compared to the perspectives of countries of origin, transit, and even receiving (but in the non-Western world) (Dines et al., 2018; Mouthaan, 2019). Looking at transnational actors, one has to consider the central role of European Union and its border agency Frontex in reinforcing these dominant narratives. As the operational arm of the EU’s external border management, Frontex does not merely implement border control rather contributes to the creation and sharing of specific understandings of migration, often framed through the lenses of risk, security, and irregularity. Through its risk analyses, operational reports, and public communication strategies, the agency helps institutionalize a vision of migration as a phenomenon requiring advanced technological surveillance and coordinated enforcement. Scholars have shown how Frontex’s practices and narratives participate in constructing migrants as threats, legitimizing expanded border infrastructures and exceptional measures at the EU’s external frontiers (Léonard & Kaunert, 2023; Léonard, 2014; Neal, 2009).

Intergovernmental, international organizations are actors that also bring forward narratives around migration. Existing literature on migration narratives and practices has efficiently analyzed how intergovernmental and transnational organizations deal with migration through narratives and practices, underlining the increasing tendency in the EU and its member states to strengthen their borders – through the creation of physical barriers, more thorough controls and agreements and collaboration with third neighboring states on the fulfilment of these controls and strengthening of the borders (Carens, 2013; Castles et al., 2014; Ceccorulli, 2021; Ceccorulli et al., 2020; Diez, 2004; Fassi & Lucarelli, 2021). In addition, while EU migration governance has been fragmented, but heavily intergovernmental since its creation, recent developments have shown that national state control of borders has become increasingly relevant within the EU after resolutions of some member states to re-introduce internal border

controls in specific situations, threatening the Schengen system (Ceccorulli, 2021). EU member states that share borders with third countries have found themselves re-defining their borders which are now not only national borders but also the borders between the third state and the territory of the EU. In addition, crucial research has also underlined how EU's external migration governance has become increasingly intertwined with international organizations creating a multilevel structure in the management of migration (Lavenex, 2016) which allows the EU to expand its influence, compensate for gaps, and bolster its legitimacy. However, this also means a clear change in the role of IOs which, strengthening their involvement in priorities of the EU, constraints their autonomy and goals, both discursively and practically.

c. The role of civil society

Furthermore, studies have investigated narratives and governance by civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015; Bevilacqua, 2018; Cusumano & Bell, 2021; Cuttitta, 2018, 2020; Cuttitta et al., 2023; Vollmer et al., 2025; Wee et al., 2019), reflecting on their role in re-politicization and challenge of migration narratives and governance which are considered dominant in political fora (Wee et al., 2019), in migration management, for example in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea (Bevilacqua, 2018; Cusumano & Bell, 2021; Cuttitta, 2018) and in narratives and governance at the border and in governance of externalization (Cuttitta, 2020; Cuttitta et al., 2023; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022; Puggioni, 2017) also reflecting on ways to address such trends of externalization which, we have to remind ourselves, can be and are constantly contested by migrants and part of civil society on these border contexts (Landau, 2025a). Civil society organizations and the spaces in which they bring forward a narrative of migration and migration governance have been considered, for example, as reflecting and reproducing dominant narratives constructed on uneven power dynamics (Wee et al., 2019) and as highly interacting and dependent on international organizations (IOs) and national states and used by national and supranational institutions to outsource their migration governance activities to actors which could be considered more "neutral" (Bello, 2022b; Cuttitta, 2020). In this sense, they can be considered as reenacting and perpetuating dominant narratives of migration and its governance. Other studies focusing on civil society, however, reported CSOs effort and success in proposing alternative narratives of migration and the way it should be governed (Marino & Hategekimana, 2025; Vollmer et al., 2025).

Moreover, looking at narrative of migration is important to distinguish as well narratives *about* migration (which we introduced extensively above) and narrative *by* the main protagonists of the phenomenon, i.e., the migrants (Boswell et al., 2021). Studies focused on

migrants' experiences told by them, the protagonists of the migration process highlight the suffering and abuse of the subjects, but also contrast mainstream narratives and assumptions on migration processes and motivations (Boswell et al., 2021; Collins, 2018; Lucht, 2011). Collins (2018), specifically, investigates the role of *desire* in the decision-making processes of migrants, exposing the various shortcomings of migration management theory which research migration as a knowable phenomenon, solely economic or forced, that can be rationally planned and controlled. Consequently, migration management theory sees migrants as a utility-maximizing individual that can rationally make decisions solely to serve their own interests, a decision maker that chooses to move autonomously or individualistically. A closer look into migrants' *desire* might overcome the enormous fallacy of migration management theory which understands movement only as the product of calculated rational choices made in specific points in time.

Scholars have pointed out the lack of migrants' voices in the media about them, highlighting how proposed negative media narrative and representation influences public opinion. Not only are migrants' voices absent in the news, they are actively excluded through what the literature has defined as "bordering" (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Three are the ways in which this practice of "bordering" takes place: bordering by silencing which refers to the social marginalization of migrants, bordering by collectivization, referring to the complete absence of reports on specific groups within the broader umbrella of the term "migrant", and by de-contextualization, referring to the complete absence of historical context of migration flows.

Research on narratives within the public and the impact that narratives have on the opinion of the public is less and less developed. As Boswell et al. (2021) explain studies conducted on narratives in the public opinion are often qualitative and regarding small sample of the population. Despite this, however, I argue that findings that are small-scale, despite the constant assumption of being less significant in research, can tell us a lot about the public. One study included in this dissertation has investigated, for example, how emotions have a role in articulating narratives of inward and outward migration in the public, in urban contexts (Marino & de Athouguia Filipe, 2025): these findings are generalizable in the way emotions and societal grievances have a crucial role in the construction of specific narratives of human mobility. The study shows how resentful affectivities shape, interconnect, and mobilize narratives around inward and outwards migration, linking migration issues to normative expectations of democracy, often translating complex social-political dynamics into resentful affectivities through narratives of migration that give coherence to empty-crowded paradoxes. In addition,

studies have investigated the role of media in constructing narratives which can sustain or not public support towards specific migration flows and people on the move (International Organization for Migration, 2023). Studies have also shown that it is not only the media, but specific narrative strategies by politicians which present a cycle of migration politics in their narratives, which once have reached the media spotlight, shape the perspective on migration (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Maneri & Quassoli, 2016) and, even, on specific groups of migrants (Maneri, 2019).

d. The role of discrimination and racialization and the concept of bordering

One aspect to be considered in the construction of narratives of migration flows and migrants is the role of racism, processes of racialization and discrimination in European societies – but also more globally. Literature has indeed reflected on the role of colonial, racist legacies in the societies analyzed for their specific case studies – that mostly focused on the European context (Bello, 2017, 2022a, 2022b; Boswell, Christina et al., 2021; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021a, 2021a; Dines et al., 2018; Freemantle & Landau, 2022; Hellgren & Bereményi, 2022; Kaufmann, 2018; Landau, 2025b; Paynter, 2022). Such colonial, racist legacies are analyzable in EU governance of migration (Freemantle & Landau, 2022; Landau, 2025a, 2025b), for example, where a façade of progressive vocabulary, underlining global cooperation and aligned with the EU’s professed liberal commitments, reinforces a racialized logic of what Landau (2025b) defines as global pre-criminalization. Through predictive, data-driven techniques, Africans are cast as inherently prone to “irregular” or “irresponsible” movement. As a result, Africans become pre-emptively suspect, governed as potential perpetrators of migration offences they have not – and may never – commit. Migration policies’ interventions by the EU and their member states are thus justified, in a paternalistic approach, as attempts to, they claim, protect Africans from their own presumed irresponsibility as they fail to understand what serves their best interests (Landau, 2025b).

Earlier in 2022, Rosenberg investigated how structural racial inequality have persisted in international migration governance even if all overt racism is less frequent in today’s world and many instances of racism are hidden nowadays in plain sight. This is visible in international migration in the uncritical narrative on why some migrants appear threatening, such as African migrants (Landau, 2025b), and others do not. The author claims that the obsession with the right to border control is not an intrinsic feature of sovereign states but rather a modern consequence of racism. This obsession has become more and more normalized to the point that it has become a normative practice, namely meaning that this is how the state should conventionally behave. The national state and its borders are thus here understood as means of exclusion of non-Western/non-European migrants. Double standards in how migration is defined and

qualitatively described are also highlighted in the already cited MMN framework, which was inspiring for reflecting on hierarchies of mobility and how racialization shapes who is constructed as a “migrant” in the first place. Mobility, for example, associated with whiteness and today’s conception of Europeanness is rarely problematized, while mobility associated with racialized bodies is defined as “immigration” and subject to some degree of suspicion, to the supposed need for control and strict management. The framework’s focus on hierarchies of mobility reveals how colonial legacies and today’s bordering practices converge to produce differential regimes of movement, in which some human beings circulate freely and are subject to little scrutiny, while others are more surveilled.

Already in the early 2000s, key works by Cole (2000) and Benhabib (2004) contested the closed-societal, state-centric approach of classic liberal thought, and reflect on the inconsistencies of declared freedom of movement for some and not for others, as a consequence of an exclusive universality of Anglo-European/Western thought. Freedom of movement is, in theory, universal – that is, for all – but in practice, it excludes non-Anglo-Europeans/Western and has been doing so for centuries – in narratives and practices. In addition, both authors highlight how Western powers tend to forget that their route to modernity was achieved through slavery and colonialism, made possible by racist ideology and by negating non-Anglo-European people, history, and culture. As a result, this idea of freedom was created in a world that excluded others and continues to do so. This deeply rooted consequence of the European tradition, enabled by racist ideology, created the concept of human dignity, which freedom of movement is part of, while carrying out slavery and colonialism. Moreover, it appears that racist ideology keeps enabling unequal treatment in international migration. Freedom of movement, as conceived by Western thought, seems to not be meant for all (Benhabib, 2004; Cole, 2000) – starting from the very way some migration flows are talked about.

As we already saw with the concept of “bordering” in narratives outlined by Chouliaraki & Zaborowski (2017), Cole (2000) reflects on the functions of borders in separating members of society and the ones excluded from membership and underlines how liberal theories of social justice arguing distribution stopping at the border do not only exclude outsiders from the process of distribution but also from the theory itself. Borders have a crucial role in this approach to migration as it is on the borders that the distribution stops: this body of theories takes the boundary between inside and outside as a given and, as a result, denies the “Other”, anybody outside the border (Cole, 2000). The criticism points thus to the absence of the alien from theory. If freedom of justice and property take shape in a universality designed to exclude others, the “Other”, the non-European outsider in this case, will be naturally limited in their

capacity for autonomy and excluded from any process of legitimization. In addition, in what seems like an overall episode of amnesia, colonialism, imperialism and slavery are completely omitted in the development of the theory of liberal nationalism. The Rawlsian *Law of Peoples*, for example, omits “the plunder of Africa by all Western societies [...], the global character of the African slave trade and its contribution to the accumulation of capitalist wealth in the United States, [...] the colonization of the Americas and the British domination and exploitation of India” (Benhabib, 2004, p.100, My emphasis).

What racism and processes of racialization in international migration governance are showing us today is the category of non-humanity, derived from slavery, transformed into the category of non-nationality (Cole, 2000). This operates through an emphasis on the national state and its rights on its borders/its right to exclude, to put in place a bordering process, on which we will delve deeper in Chapter 2 section 4, depicting migration as a disruption of the *complete and closed social system* of peoples, which Rawlsian theory seem to often correspond to states, although not explicitly claimed by the author (Rawls, 1999). However, as Benhabib (2004) underlines, reflecting on the concept of the decline of citizenship, the alien, the outsider is not at the border of polity but within it. This clear-cut binarism between nationals and foreigners, between citizens of the complete and closed social system and migrants is inadequate to describe and analyze the fluidity of reality (Behnabib, 2004). Migration can be perceived as disruptive and problematic if we conceptualize peoplehood as a complete and closed social system indeed; however, peoplehood has always been a dynamic rather than a static reality. These theories bring evidence that dominant narratives of migration come from such processes of construction of peoplehood as complete and closed social system. Narratives which challenge this system, including these critical theories, are alternatives to the dominant.

e. Understanding of migration narratives in this dissertation

In this dissertation, I understand narratives of migration as narratives *about* and *by*: namely narratives about migration and people on the move and narratives by people on the move. In line with the approach developed by the MMN’ lenses, I situate human movement – and consequently the way it is narrated – within a broader continuum of mobilities shaped by power, bordering practices, and differential access to rights (nccr – on the move, 2019). Understanding migration through this lens is what allowed me to analyze narratives of migration not as isolated perspectives on a specific group, but as part of wider societal processes that define whose mobility is accepted, whose is constrained, and whose is presented as problematic, generated by/generating crisis. I researched how migration is narrated in receiving societies (in the case of the two border societies of Italy and Spain), not only by an external perspective (i.e., what

we came to define in Chapter 2 section 1a. as categorization), but also by an internal one, namely the experience of the protagonists of human mobility, the migrant themselves (self-identification). To make the analytical scope more explicit, the dissertation focuses on migration narratives as they are created across specific social and political spaces. These include political narratives articulated by governments, parties, and elected officials; media narratives constructed by mainstream news outlets and journalists; institutional narratives emerging from EU bodies and public authorities; civil society narratives voiced by NGOs, solidarity groups, and local associations; and narratives by migrants themselves, expressed through activism, public interventions, and everyday meaning-making. These narratives operate in and across borderlands, national media, urban contexts, and civil society spaces, shaping how belonging, mobility, and crisis are understood in the border societies of Italy and Spain. Given that bordering processes, we will see in Chapter 2 section 4, go way beyond the crossing of physical borders at European frontiers, narratives of migration and people on the move often involve people that are static, but either have migrant origins or they are categorized (i.e., external perspective) as non-belonging to a specific society by the dominant groups who are seen as belonging. As a result, my research aimed to report instances of migration narrated by those who are defined as belonging to the national state and those who are not: in this stands the importance in my studies of the specific border societies selected and their physical borders in the Mediterranean region, case selection that I will elaborate in the section 4 of Chapter 2.

2.3 In Moments of Crisis – When do Observable Facts Become Crises?

a. Evolution of the crisis concept

A crucial concept of my dissertation is the one of crisis: indeed, the aim of the research conducted throughout these four years was to understand the potential impact moments of disruption (i.e., crises) have on the way phenomena are narrated. As a result, much of the work you will read in this dissertation looks at the narrative of migration and people on the move in contexts of crises. How to define crisis, however? Literature on the concept has been trying to define it at different levels and in different disciplines. The term permeates our lives and has been used in different contexts and analyzed through different lenses. Its conceptualization is, as a result, quite a daunting process. Nevertheless, scholarly literature in various fields has been trying to define the concept. What does crisis mean, then? Answering the question regarding its ontology can perhaps also shed some light on how crises come to be and potentially how they are dealt with.

The origins of the term crisis are traced back to the ancient Greek verb κρίνω, which could mean separate, choose, judge and decide. These origins can explain the idea of crisis as a crucial moment of judgment or decision: the moment something is determined, decided and judged (Koselleck & Richter, 2006; Roitman, 2013). This conceptualization underlines already a difference between the moment before the crisis – the potential judgement or decision – and the moment during and after the decision. It seems to already underline a situation of change. Indeed, what is often intuitively understood as crisis is “a pivotal moment or turning point – an emergency situation” (McAdam, 2014: p.11). Throughout the centuries, the term came to be referred to as a political crisis referred to a moment of instability of government, which led to conflict and – often – to a change in power.

In the 17th century, crisis in its political sense often bared medical and theological connotations of crisis as a decisive moment between life and death, a moment of unprecedented – or rarely preceded – state of change (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). While, in the 19th century, crisis as a transitional period was seen in a deterministic light, linked to a medical conceptualization partly presented above. In medical terms, crises in illnesses can be resolved with healing but can also return after a period of recovery, in case the former crises had compromised some other organs or had not totally healed (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). These so-defined imperfect crises in medical terms bring forward the deterministic idea of crisis as bound to recur until healing or death is reached – when looking at the social order, namely a more just and better system or the collapse of the same system.

From the 20th century onwards, philosophers began conceptualizing crisis as an immanent and permanent condition of the world. The concept has here lost its meaning as a final or transitional stage. Instead, it has become a structural category for describing Christian history itself (Innerarity, 2022; Koselleck & Richter, 2006). Therefore, crisis as a state of exception becomes the new normal, which scholars also relate more closely to modernity. Modernity, in specific, is permeated by crises and, some argue, the crisis itself (Innerarity, 2022; Sassen, 2016). Crisis could thus be conceived as the normalcy of modernity. Scholarly debate in sociology has long discussed the coherence in calling the constant instability of society as crisis. According to Innerarity (2022), the term, in its correct meaning refers to a serious situation that is intense and momentarily. However, not all events defined nowadays as crises are bound to be solved sooner or later. More specifically, when we look at – for example – systemic crisis, at the macro level, it seems more complex to define and formulate a return to normalcy and stability as the issue, the crisis seems itself to be part of the normalcy (Innerarity, 2022). We are, in this case, advocating for a return to normalcy and stability that was not present

before the so-perceived crisis. As a result, we may convince ourselves about a normalcy to reach while the situation of crisis we find ourselves in has been the system, the normalcy.

b. Crisis as a permanent condition

If there is something the scholarly debate agrees on when looking at conceptualizations of crisis, how they come to be and how they could be dealt with is that while it is used as a concept to simplify a complex situation, there is no unanimity on it and, as a result, on potential solutions and instruments to address the complex situation (Innerarity, 2022; Neyrat, 2005). There is thus a claim that the term crisis is actually instrumentalized to describe situations and events that appear extremely complex and that are better understood through the framework of crisis, although these situations and events might not have been sudden and might not have a temporary duration. As a result, “we do not live in a society in which there are contagions but in a society that is contagious.” (Innerarity, 2022: p. 197).

This permanent state of crisis can be explained and understood by thinking of the struggle in defining and agreeing on the normalcy we would need to come back to solve a potential crisis. As a result, the concept of solutions to crises becomes inconceivable – or at least of a solution that would be considered a solution by everyone existing in the system (Innerarity, 2022; Neyrat, 2005). It is the plurality of the system of freedom of thought and expression which makes it impossible for a common solution to be agreed upon. Dissent is a critical *sine qua non* condition for the existence of democracy. As opposed to totalitarian states, there is no overall, total rationale in democratic societies (Rohbeck, 2025). I argue that, while in a totalitarian state, there is undoubtedly a formal total rationale due to persecution of dissent, this dissent informally survives totalitarian regimes. As a result, I argue that our very existence as human beings makes a common agreeable solution to crises unconceivable – while it might seem conceivable for a specific period of time in totalitarian regimes as they aim to limit freedoms.

In addition, I would argue that the very concept of solution to a crisis and the obsession with creating a system in which an agreeable solution would be possible has potentially generated more systematic crises – as the solutions were reached through silencing dissent, for example, excluding some members of those systems that experienced the moment of crisis. Taking the example of totalitarianism, while its system might put forward a total solution to a crisis, removing dissent by force does not ensure its total removal from human beings’ minds, and solutions that have been reached only by one part of society – with the exclusion of other actors and subjects of that society – will not be sustainable for the existence of a society that also comprises other parts – excluded from the solution-reaching process.

Crisis in today's world has been defined as "an omnipresent sign. [...] mobilized as the defining category of historical situation, past and present" (Roitman, 2013: 3). It is conceived as the access to the turning, defining moments of history. In this sense, it has been used by political actors in a normative way, as "the grounds for transformative action" (Roitman, 2013: 7). Crisis might define the entry into a specific historical moment and – more specifically – a defining moment of change in history. Crisis is thus a diagnosis of time through which history is judged (Koselleck & Richter, 2006; Roitman, 2013).

One challenging aspect of defining and dealing with crisis is its conceptual contradiction. Rydström et al. (2022) shed light on how the crisis concept can often translate from a sudden emergency to a mundane process, which might also become an historical permanent, changing morphologically. Consequently, the scholar underlines the need to analyze what is defined as the aftermath of a crisis and the process that would lead back to normalcy. These conceptualizations are complex to develop due to the duality of crisis – considered both as an event and a process – and the ambiguity of normalcy, which often shows to be a potential aftermath of precedent crises rather than the ideal moment to return to after a disruptive event takes place.

c. Crisis as a political instrument

Another insightful approach is the one elaborated by Masco (2017), investigating crises in today's society and coined the "crisis in a crisis", specifically analyzing the case of twenty-first-century American capitalism and its logics of crisis. While crisis, at first instance, seems a term aimed "to mobilize radical endangerment to foment collective attention and action" (Masco, 2017: 65), this mobilization power has been diminishing mainly because of the term's overuse combined with the absence of narratives that would introduce positive alternatives for the future to balance the narratives of crisis. As a result, crisis as an "ever-present" is not the result of the plurality of perceptions of crisis in a democratic system but rather the result of a new mode of governance that makes use of crises in a different and peculiar way. This governance makes use of crisis not with the aim of "eliminating fears through the protective actions of the security apparatus" but rather to amplify "public dangers through inaction" (Masco, 2017: 66). As a result, according to Masco (2017), this form of governance, which has shaped this new use of crisis, not only cannot respond to disruptive events defined as crises but can contribute to creating new ones.

While Masco (2017) has focused on American capitalism and crisis logics and discourse, strands of literature have investigated capitalist development more in general as constantly characterized by crises, different from each other in duration and intensity

(Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014; Harvey, 2011, 2012). Authors have been closely looking at a global crisis of capitalism, more visible in the global uneven geographical development, which refers to capitalist development occurring unevenly over space (Hadjimichalis & Hudson 2014). As a result, this unevenness in the development of capitalism is the main component of its crisis and, more generally, of crisis in today's world. Other political conceptualizations of crisis highly rely on the state as the actor dealing with crisis and, as a result, look at crisis as state centered or international crisis (Brecher & Wilkenfeld, 2000). In this sense, crisis is conceptualized around the centrality of states as a situation of change in a state's internal or external environment. Its international nature is related to the concept of a disruptive event that creates a policy crisis for one or more states. This conceptualization of crisis as policy crisis focused on the role of the state is clearly limited as it partially overlooks the role of non-state actors in perceiving and dealing with disruptive events.

Looking at crisis as instrument, it is worth introducing Agamben (2008)'s crucial reflections on the use of the "state of exception", documented throughout the history of human kind, where he outlines how across Western legal history, there have been recurring attempts either to free sovereign authority from legal constraints or to create legal mechanisms that authorize the suspension of law itself in specific circumstances that created the "state of exception" (Humphreys, 2006). According to Agamben (2008), in an account that brings us closer to crisis (or better "state of exception") as a permanent condition, the 20th century was a laboratory in which emergency strategies were tested and, little by little, normalized until they became a paradigm of government that is stable rather than an episodic response to one crisis. On a similar but at the same time totally different note, Fassin (2011) argues that there is not a permanent state of legal exception, as it is not law that is suspended permanently; rather, he argues for a permanent moral state of exception, in which urgent cases and humanitarian exemptions become permanent features of governance.

The two authors look at crisis as a permanent condition, something that could also be shared with the previous section in this chapter of the dissertation; however, this condition of crisis is made (thus used, instrumentalized) as permanent in these theoretical accounts, in different ways, legally for Agamben and morally for Fassin. Yet this sense of permanence does not imply that crisis is static. Rather, as I will argue in my account of "crisis as claim" in this same chapter, because social and political change is ubiquitous, the potential for crisis claims over those changes is equally ubiquitous. It is this constant availability of crisis framings, rather than the stability of any single crisis, that produces the perception of crisis as a permanent condition. Is thus the instrumentalization of crisis equally ubiquitous? I would argue, against

the accounts that see crisis as solely potentially instrumentalized, that it is not, as we cannot guarantee that every crisis claim is actually the result of a deliberative strategy. This is the limitation of approaches that focus mostly on the use of crisis by institutions and governance as rational, strategic actors. Such accounts overlook that crisis is a multi-level experience, relevant to a broad range of actors, many of whom are neither institutional nor engaged in governance.

d. Crisis as multi-level experience

Crises come to be in different circumstances and environments and, as a result, are dealt with by different actors. There are some implications to the concept of crisis in both its understanding as a temporary change of affairs to which we need to find a solution and as a permanent state of the system. I argue, in fact, that, even when analyzing one specific crisis closely, we are never looking at a single crisis but rather an articulation of several sub-crisis participating in it. Indeed, “different kinds of crisis can overlap and intersect with each other, and act as precursors or consequences of other crises, in what can be thought of as inter-crisis relations or chains of crises” (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022: 1). In addition, the definition of crisis varies according to the subjects experiencing and challenged by that specific event that is defined as crisis. As a result, a change in the state of affairs can entail different levels of crisis according to the subjects – at the macro, meso, and micro levels as the changes can be seen either as structural or more individual or group related. As a result, the challenge in the study and analysis of crises can be referred back to the fact that the concept, its characteristics and the experience of it is created at various levels of society (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022).

When looking at subjects of crisis, we refer to people that perceive the crisis. Any human being who enters into contact with a disruptive event will have their own perception of it. Different perceptions of disruptive events can create different discourses around a specific disruptive event. Scholarly debates on crisis have focused on and discussed their instrumentalization and politicization, highlighting how some disruptive events appear more as such than others – becoming more present, salient and controversial in their narration (Bitschnau et al., 2021; McConnell, 2020). It seems then that a perception of crisis is highly influenced – or better – constantly interconnected with the narrative around the specific disruptive event that has been perceived as crisis. Indeed, literature discussing the concept of crisis has often linked it to the narrative of crisis (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022; Bhaba, 2018; Bitschnau et al., 2021; Boswell et al., 2011; Castells, 2019; Innerarity, 2022; Masco, 2017; McConnell, 2020; Mountz & Hiemstra, 2014; Roitman, 2013; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). A strand of literature on crisis thus treats narrative as central to its analysis. Specifically, it looks

at how crises are actively mobilized to serve agendas (their instrumentalization), and how they become politicized. Politicization is understood here as the process by which actors detect the political potential embedded in existing changes and shifts.

e. Crisis as claim

Crisis has thus been studied connected to the ways in which it is *visibilized* and politicized. This tradition continues with the present dissertation in which crisis is to be understood as “claim” asserting that the difference between the “is” (status quo, facts, or claimed facts) and the “should” (normative expectation) is unacceptably large and that therefore it is *urgent* that we or someone take *immediate* action (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). Thus, a fact, or the status quo, do not simply exist, but the normative aspect of what the situation “should” be is advanced and developed through a claim. A claim describes a public statement — it may be written, spoken, or communicated in other ways, such as through images — to assert that something is true (Cambridge Dictionary, definition of claim). A crisis claim consists of two subclaims, one asserting the status quo, namely how the world “is” and one stating a normative expectation, namely how the world “should be”.

As I introduced in section a. of this chapter conceptualizing narratives, which contain claims, when there is a claim, there is an audience to whom a claim is addressed. It is the audience accepting a crisis claim that increments the possibility of a claim to be shared in a narrative. Whether an audience accepts a claim depends not only on the persuasiveness of the claim, but also on the legitimacy of the actor making such a claim. Such legitimacy can stem from different sources: social legitimacy exists when the claim maker is perceived as having a legitimate voice; formal legitimacy describes a situation when the claim maker has a formal position to make a claim. My conceptualization of crisis in this dissertation highlights the power aspect, underlining how some actors are in a better position to make successful crisis claims than others because of specific forms of legitimacy being at play in the process.

The advantage of such conceptualization is that we can account for central aspects of the nature of crises, their impact on society, and the diffusion of references to crises in public narratives. The conceptualization includes questions of legitimacy that are linked to the power of spreading a claim and, with that, the focus on an audience to whom a claim is made/with whom the claim is shared. The focus on the audience makes it clear that in order to have influence and standing in the public eye, a claim is not only made but it also needs to be recognized as legitimate by at least a part of society. When a claim is accepted — even by a part of society — the actor/s who made it has/have a justification for action.

According to this conceptualization, crisis as claim is constituted by the following elements:

- An actor who makes a claim, whom we refer to as the claim-maker. Makers are often political actors in the broader sense, and may make crisis claims in the name of a group — a claim to representation that may bolster credibility and legitimacy (Saward, 2006).
- An argument about a situation where the idea of the “is” and “should” differ.
- Based on the argument, the maker asserts the need for urgent action. This assertion is an explicit or implicit call to action connected to the difference between the “is” and the “should”. The “is” requires thus urgent action. Without an element of urgency, we may look at claims constituting a narrative of a contested issue, but not of a crisis.
- A claim requires an audience to whom it is offered, who may reject or accept it. The argument has the potential to be rejected because both the “is” and the “should” are open to contestation and rejection in the social world. For example, the audience may contest whether there was a change in facts (the “is”) or whether this change is undesirable (the “should”) or can contest the desirability of the normative expectation (the “should”). The argument may be accepted, but the claim to urgency, thus the claim of the situation being a crisis, may be rejected when the audience does not consider urgent action necessary or possible. In addition, as I briefly introduced above, the claim-maker may be considered illegitimate and/or questionable. With that, there is an explicit dimension of power in our conceptualization of claims and of narratives composed by claims.

Through this conceptualization of crisis as claim, I highlight the connection of this concept with research on narratives – since a lot of – if not all – aspects we touch upon as scholars when investigating crisis include the way the situation is perceived and then shared (or not) as a crisis, and if so, which kind of crisis. In this process of interpretation, I mentioned, claim-makers and audience are crucial. In addition, the media – be this mass media or social media – play a key role in connecting the claim-maker to the audience, providing a platform for the spreading of some claims – rather than others (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This conceptualization is used in my dissertation focusing on the role of claims in narratives, given the scope of my research. However, I underline that, while the conceptualization of crises as claims may seem constructivist, the role of facts that describe the world and (social) change is central. In this sense, there is an objectivist core: without facts that can be observed, there is no crisis — where a situation objectively does not change for any actor in society, it is difficult to make a credible claim to a crisis in the sense that the audience is unlikely to accept such a claim as legitimate. In an interconnected world, however, change of some kind is commonplace, opening the possibility to claim a crisis. Indeed, we argue that the increasing relevance of the concept of

crisis may be rooted in the nature of today's highly interconnected societies, where facts and change constantly surround us, and consequently the interpretation of those facts and change (cf. Cerny 1996 on the implications of globalization). As a result, being surrounded by interpretations of facts — and disruptive facts — we are increasingly surrounded by crisis claims. But facts alone are not sufficient for a crisis to exist in the social world: they need to be recognized and combined with urgency. As a result, the facts may exist, but their interpretation as crises might not always exist. Interpretations of facts as crises can come to identify crises different in quality depending on the makers of the claims. Fact can be claimed as crises differently by different makers and differently through time.

Through this conceptualization, the aim has been to propose a framework dealing with crisis that would bridge diverse existing approaches and clarify the concept and its operationalization. The existing academic debate on the concept presents mainly two approaches: objectivist and constructivist. Through the former, a crisis is an objectifiable event thus a situation that can be described as a crisis based on objective criteria. Such an approach is useful for the investigation of crisis management, described as the process through which specific actors get together through multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems which are complex and cannot be solved by single actors (Nohrstedt et al., 2018; Scott & Nowell, 2020). Crisis management looks at the response to crises; however, it rarely questions the shared understanding of the problem as a crisis for the management approach to work. Through the latter, a crisis is an event that is understood in diverse ways by societies and societal actors. Here, crisis is defined by how it accumulates meaning through time and space. Constructivist accounts analyze crises as a social construct and focus on the “construction of knowledge and the resulting assignment of meaning” (Spector, 2022: 1) rather than objectively verifiable facts which can be considered disruptions. These approaches differ in the way they perceive the crisis ontology: objectivists accept that a crisis is always and firstly observable from which it follows that “facts, truths, relationships [that simply] exist in the world”, an implicit positivist ontological perspective (Hinchey, 2010: 36; Spector, 2022). Constructivists argue, on the other hand, that “an objective, uncontested understanding of the world does not and cannot exist” (Spector, 2022: 3).

Furthermore, as we saw earlier, studies have utilized nuances on the concept of crisis within these two broader approaches just outlined. A structural approach to crisis for example understands it as part of a continuity of everyday dynamics (Dobry, 2009), highlighting the normalcy of crisis (Fassin, 2013; Rydström et al., 2022). Theorists have also approached crisis as something exceptional, specific and delimitable. Whether objectifiable or constructed,

through this approach, crisis is seen as an event which can threaten and drastically change a status quo, defined as normalcy (McConnell, 2020). Here, a crisis is conceived as a rupture which needs to be addressed to restore normalcy (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). As such, crises are often regarded as ‘critical turning points’ which have the potential to change society or governance by both disrupting normalcy and creating opportunities (Amenta et al., 2010; Benford & Snow, 2000; Habermas, 2001; Koselleck & Richter, 2006).

The conceptualization I bring forward connects existing interpretations of crises. The framework, in fact, does not disregard the positivist ontology that [disruptive] facts exist in the world and that information is verifiable, while it acknowledges that narratives around a specific disruptive event play a crucial role in the development of the disruptive event’s understanding as a crisis and the consequent response.

It is important that I underline here that theorists have already explored the conceptualization of crises as claims (Kalkman, 2019; Lyotard, 1979; Spector, 2019, 2022). Such conceptualizations have focused on the construction of a crisis as an urgent event, but with a focus on discursive acts, remaining, however, slightly vague about the process of diffusion of these acts. They also generally avoid normative considerations about whether a “position was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ but how the claims reflect the background and interest of the claim-maker” (Spector, 2022: 10), not considering the role of evidence in reporting a disruptive event and its consequential characterization as a crisis. In addition, studies utilizing a conceptualization of crisis as a claim have up to now stopped short of asking why some claims to a crisis might be successful while others fail to find resonance. I argue the need to consider a broader set of actors, including an audience that can diffuse, accept, reject, or reformulate a claim. By introducing the relevance of an audience and tracing how a crisis claim can diffuse, the conceptualization proposed in this dissertation gives scholars the possibility to consider questions of legitimacy and universality in interpreting disruptive events without denying the objective nature of disruptive facts, with an intent that is reflexive rather than relativist.

As last, but very important point, I highlight that this conceptualization of crisis might risk circular reasoning if we do not clarify differences between any [political] speech act (containing potential claims) and a claim of crisis. Let us start underlining that a claim of crisis needs to contain: a. a factual assertion; b. a normative judgement; c. a call to urgency; d. an audience uptake; and e. a performative force that is high (connected to the call to urgency) which explicitly justifies extraordinary measures and mobilization. While an ordinary political statement can contain claims with a normative judgement, it does not have to be referring to disruptive facts, it does not invoke the need for urgent intervention. As a result, the acceptance

or refusal of an ordinary political statement is not as crucial as the ordinary statement does not need to be accepted so that urgent intervention is accepted by a broader audience. More importantly, while a crisis claim is a political statement, not every political statement is a crisis claim. A crisis claim is a *specific type* of political statement. Is thus any crisis claim a political statement or do crisis claims exist that are not defined as political statements? Crisis claims can exist outside formal politics, but they are still political statements in a broad sense, because they involve a normative judgement and call for urgent intervention. What they are not is necessarily partisan or institutional political statements. They are not always political statements in the narrow sense (party politics, government, public policy) but they are always political statements in the broad sense (claims about collective life, values, and action). Table 4 illustrates the differences between a crisis claim and an ordinary political statement. Table 5 offers examples from my data analysis carried out in empirical article VI¹ to give a better idea of what these differences entail in practice.

Table 4. Characteristics of a crisis claim versus ordinary [political] statement.

Characteristic	Crisis Claim	Ordinary Political Statement
Factual assertion	References a disruptive event or rupture that signals a deviation from normalcy.	May reference facts, but not necessarily disruptive ones.
Normative judgement	Explicitly asserts that the situation is unacceptable, intolerable, or deviates from what <i>should</i> be.	Expresses preferences, values, or evaluations, sometimes disapproval.
Urgency	Because the situation is framed as unacceptable, it implies or demands immediate action to prevent deterioration.	May call for policy change, but not urgent or exceptional intervention.
Audience	Requires audience uptake for the disruptive situation to be recognized as a crisis and for urgent intervention to be legitimized.	May also seek visibility, but its acceptance is less crucial, since no extraordinary intervention depends on audience recognition.
Performative force	Justifies or enables extraordinary measures (in speech or action) due to the urgency and rupture it asserts.	Does not imply a justification for extraordinary measures.

¹ Narrating crises of Europe's southernmost *borderscapes*: the case of Melilla and Lampedusa.

Table 5. Crisis claim or [political] statement?

Claim	Crisis Claim	Ordinary [Political] Statement	Why
Violent migrants attacking the security forces on the border in violent assault on a frontier in danger. The need to ensure Spanish territorial integrity and the call for NATO support under Article 5.	•		Disruptive event defined as threat to sovereignty. Need for exceptional NATO intervention.
The Council fully supports the efforts of Spain and other frontline countries to protect the borders of the European Union. Charles Michel		•	Border-protection statement. No urgency. Standard institutional positioning.
A tragedy for people whose lives are lost, those escaping wars, persecutions, human rights violations only to find death. Call for politics of reception rather than politics of emergency, while also demanding action to stop the trafficking of human beings causing humanitarian tragedies at sea, including calls to investigate and stop smugglers.	•		Disruptive event of deaths at sea. Calls for reception policies and investigation/stopping of smugglers.
The international community and the EU must take action in the face of such massacres of innocent people. Giorgio Napolitano	•		Disruptive event defined as massacre of innocent people through condemnation. Explicit call for EU/international action.
The government has a duty to immediately abolish the Bossi-Fini	•		Disruptive event of deaths at sea. Need to take immediate

Claim	Crisis Claim	Ordinary [Political] Statement	Why
law and define a new immigration regulatory framework to avoid these tragedies. Marco Furfaro (SEL)			legislative action in the specific Italian case.
Lampedusa is welcoming and concerned with the rights of people on the move and residents help survivors. Lampedusa should be a Nobel Peace Prize recipient.		•	Portrayal of humanitarian response. Positive moral evaluation, normative claims present. However, no urgent or exceptional action demanded.

2.4 In Border Societies

a. Border societies of Italy and Spain

In this section I outline the relevance of the selected case studies since this dissertation investigates narratives of migration in times of crisis in two southern European border countries. Southern Europe and more specifically countries like Italy and Spain are often depicted as the borders of the European continent, portrayed as the victims of poor EU coordination in matter of response to migration and inadequately prepared to meet the challenges “brought on by migration” (European Commission, 2015; Lillie et al., 2023; Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2013).

Looking at Italy, the country has been at the forefront in its efforts to implement high securitization of migration and aggressive militarized foreign policy from the early 2000s, creating at the time a model of externalization through bilateral agreements (Calarco, 2024b, 2024a; Terlizzi, 2021), which inspires externalization practices still today. In 2007, the country signed an agreement with Libya to cooperate in controlling Libyan coasts to allegedly stop human smugglers. Moreover, Italian authorities carried out several pushbacks in 2009. And Libya was not the only development in externalization: in 2011, then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi called for cooperation with Tunisia to control the border. Cooperation with Northern African countries was presented by Italy as a humanitarian type of governance because it

prevented people from leaving transit countries and thus dying at sea (Terlizzi, 2021), a narrative that we still very much hear today at the EU and member state level.

When investigating the Spanish case, it is also evident that governance of securitization of its borders in the Mediterranean started in the early 2000s, when, analysts report, the Europeanization of Spanish borders further securitized these territories bordering Morocco (Engelbert et al., 2019; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022). For example, the securitization process of the Spanish – and then EU – Moroccan border started even in the early 90s, with the first Spanish-Moroccan cooperation acts and in the early 2000s Moroccan authorities increased repressive measures on the border towards anyone trying to cross to Spain (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023).

In the 2010s, both countries of emigration with little experience in immigration governance, started dealing with a growing number of arrivals as a result of increasing political instability in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018), with arrivals starting to be highly mediatized and referenced by those in power (Terlizzi, 2021). Looking before that, although irregular immigration was widespread in Spain during the 1980s and 1990s – driven by high demand for foreign labor alongside restrictive regulations – the country has since reported a far more developed approach to migration (Rinken, 2023), a development not mirrored in Italy. Despite the lack of immigration experience in the 80s and 90s, today Spain's migration policies stand out as notably inclusive, both in comparison to its own past and relative to other nations. By contrast, Italy's migration policies' trajectory has often been described as lacking a coherent, systematic approach to regulate new arrivals or to take care of established communities. This absence, coupled with inconsistencies between official policies and their implementation, has left significant gaps that are largely filled by the efforts of non-state actors (Campani, 2007; Caneva, 2014).

Furthermore, several analysts report an increase in mediatization and politicization of migration especially after the so-claimed European migration crisis of 2015 (van der Brug et al., 2015; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Engelbert et al., 2019; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Mitić, 2018), when the phenomenon was experienced and presented as a major political and humanitarian challenge for the EU and its border member states. Racialization and discrimination of people on the move have undoubtedly played a crucial role in the so-defined migration crisis in the EU and its Southern border societies. I refer here to racialization as the process of extending “racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 64), underlining that “racial meaning can be given to various forms of difference such as ideological and cultural traits allowing for a discussion

of the racialization of some groups without relying [solely] on phenotypical differences” (Selod & Embrick, 2013: 647). Research focused on the Italian case has shown evidence of processes of othering and racialization against black, brown and Muslim migrants in the country (Bello, 2022a; Lucht, 2011). In the Spanish case, racialization has also been investigated both in civil society and institutions: the Spanish case is peculiar for the country’s historical development and construction as a Southern protection of “Fortress Europe” against Arab or Muslims invasions. Indeed, this is what makes the Spanish process of racialization peculiar, namely the development of anti-Arab sentiments, visible in some regions of Southern Italy – as well due to their proximity to the Arab and Muslim worlds – but still not to the same extent. While research shows that ethnic relations in Spain appear to be less violent compared to other EU member states and to Italy, reports show large-scale exploitation by employers, every-day discrimination by the population and harassment from the police in both countries specifically looking at African migrants (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015).

In both countries though, there is evidence of specific negative attitudes towards, mainly black, brown and Muslim migrants seen as a challenge and threat. Racism has a key role in the problematization of specific migration flows comparing to others. What is quite puzzling, nevertheless, is the clear obsession with the threat of immigration in a continent where, evidence has increasingly been showing, we find urgent issues such as emigration, aging population and depopulation, especially in Southern member states such as Italy and Spain (Becerra & González, 2025; Grignoli et al., 2024; Lama et al., 2025; Tintori & Romei, 2017; Zerka, 2019). Despite these worrying findings regarding emigration, research has found that governance and discourse in Italy and Spain have mainly been concerned with a problem of immigration (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018; Brandariz et al., 2025; Bulli & Soare, 2018; Cervi et al., 2020; González Enríquez, 2007; Lama et al., 2025). Furthermore, data has shown that while people might arrive in the member states of Italy and Spain, their objective is often not to stay there (Barbero & Blanco, 2022; Hoque, 2024). This obsession with a crisis of immigration is thus conveyed by specific narratives of flows towards the countries – narratives which are often constrained to specific perspectives of time and place (Albahari, 2017; Ayata, Bilgin et al., 2024; Bello, 2022c; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022; Gabrielli, 2025; Marino, 2025). Qualitative studies of [visual] narratives by media and/or influential political actors show, for example in the case of Spain, the focus on portraying immigration solely at the border and in case of arrivals at the borders focusing visually and discursively on the quantity of the people arriving with specific choices of images and words (Gabrielli, 2025; Giaxoglou & Spilioti, 2017).

Drawing on these puzzling insights from existing research, I contend that these countries' intense preoccupation with immigration lies in how it has been narrated in relation to these countries' most peculiar borders. As a result came my interest in analyzing how migration and migrants are narrated in specific moments of disruption on two different EU member states' borders, namely Italian and Spanish borders on the Central and Western Mediterranean Sea.

b. Physical borders

The border cases examined in this dissertation are situated in the Central and Western Mediterranean. Recent scholarship has increasingly called for treating the Mediterranean itself as an analytical category (Chambers, 2008; Zapata-Barrero, 2023), advocating for a Mediterranean thinking research perspective. While national institutions remain central in producing narratives about these territories, the Med Thinking approach moves beyond methodological nationalism, highlighting the long-standing transnational mobility that characterizes the region and arguing that nation-state frameworks have limited scholarly attention to what Mediterranean societies share beyond their relatively recent and historically shifting borders (Isabella & Zanou, 2016).

Methodological nationalism has also produced a distorted understanding of mobility in this area, obscuring the role of non-EU states and overlooking the ambiguity of narratives and practices in a space where national jurisdiction can be very ambiguous (Marino et al., 2024). Furthermore, a Med Thinking lens allows to trace the historical construction of national and European border identities. The aim is not to dismantle these identities, but to critically interrogate them and create space for diverse perspectives on them, perspectives that are present in such a diverse area that is the Mediterranean geography/space.

The Mediterranean Sea is a landscape of borders – sites of encounter, exchange, and often conflict. In this context, borders function as *borderscapes* (Brambilla, 2015; Brambilla et al., 2015; Krichker, 2021): dynamic spaces continually shaped by transnational flows that challenge the modernist notion of fixed national territories (dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015). Conceptualizing borderlands as *borderscapes* has allowed border studies to move beyond a purely material understanding of borders and to examine how non-physical bordering processes interact with physical ones. This does not mean disregarding the material, infrastructural dimensions of borders, which are still very relevant and consequential, (Bassi, 2018; Baumann et al., 2011; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2024; González-Páramo, 2021), but rather situating them within a broader analytical frame, considering broader implications of

borders, which result often in processes of non-physical/non-material borders with very tangible consequences for those [considered] beyond them.

These Mediterranean *borderscapes* – historical crossroads of empires and strategic sites of power – are where the consequences of the contemporary fixation on border control become most visible. As Baldwin-Edwards (2006) argues, spaces such as Melilla, Ceuta, and Lampedusa have been increasingly instrumentalized to reinforce a security-driven approach to migration governance, often in the absence of coherent EU coordination. This framing reduces mobility in these areas to a security issue, sidelining questions of employment, regularization, and the rights of long-term residents. Despite this securitizing narrative, these borderlands have long histories of transnational mobility as, as already mentioned, movement is an intrinsic feature of these regions.

c. Non-physical borders

Borders have immaterial aspects to them which are also investigated in this dissertation, which also examines the several assumptions that have shaped the understanding of borders through a multi-perspectival approach (Rumford, 2012). Such an approach, aligned with a Med Thinking approach described above, moves away from a state-centric view and builds on Balibar's argument that "borders are everywhere" and do not need to be visible to be effective (Rumford, 2012). Although the case studies are located along the Italian and Spanish national borders, my approach emphasizes that borders are not solely tied to national sovereignty or state security. Instead, it highlights the role of multiple actors in producing, reshaping, and erasing borders through narratives, actors which will be introduced in the next section of this second chapter of the dissertation.

When studying borders and migration, it is essential to recognize new forms of bordering and remote border control that may not be visible, physical, or directly linked to state authorities. Non-physical bordering contributes to the exclusion of migrants' voices and can occur in at least three ways, as already outlined at page 28 section 2.2c of this dissertation: bordering by silencing, by collectivization and by de-contextualization (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). The significance of both physical and non-physical borders becomes especially clear in discourses of politicization and securitization of migration. As already elaborated on at page 25, research has shown how populist rhetoric exploits situations framed as emergencies to advance extreme nationalist claims (Agnew & Shin, 2019; Casaglia & Coletti, 2021a; Kaufmann, 2017; Kymlicka, 2016). Populist actors frequently narrate threats at the border and rely on territorial language that constructs a stark divide between "Us" and "Them," "good" and "evil," in order to identify scapegoats for contemporary social disruptions.

Non-physical bordering also occurs through othering, the essentialist division between “Us” and “Them,” and through racialization, a cultural and political process of othering in which race is invoked as an explanatory category (Murji & Solomos, 2004).

Migrants’ exclusion from public narratives reflects a broader form of exclusion from European receiving societies. This exclusion is produced through narrative constructions of historical memory, operationalized through symbolic distinctions between “Self/Us” and “Other/Them,” which shape collective identity and interpretations of history (Boswell et al., 2021; Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Sahin-Mencutek, 2020). As already mentioned, philosophers and political theorists have long examined exclusion in relation to migration (Benhabib, 2004; Cole, 2000). Migration challenges traditional notions of political membership and requires political systems to develop principles and practices for integrating newcomers. One of the central mechanisms for regulating political membership is national citizenship, tied to the imagined global order of nation-states (Benhabib, 2004; Cole, 2000).

Nation-states thus appear to hold an inherent right and responsibility to exclude through border controls and restrictions on political membership (Benhabib, 2004; Cole, 2000; Rosenberg, 2022). In liberal democracies, some forms of bordering may be more defensible than others, but all remain “open to challenge, resignification, and deinstitutionalization” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 17). Even when national identity is framed in civic rather than ethnic terms – emphasizing solidarity and attempting to avoid arbitrary exclusions – the very structure of the nation-state carries “an exclusionary potential” (Gianni, 2023, p. 5). This process of bordering, however, is not solely institutional or bureaucratic, it is intrinsic in several other layers of receiving societies and their bordering processes. Investigating narratives can help us shed light on the ways these non-physical bordering processes manifest and how they – may or may not – be challenged. Behind this reflection is the idea of investigating narratives at these receiving societies very physical borders while simultaneously reflect on non-physical processes of bordering: the two are relevant to this dissertation as the physical borders create an image of migration but then they also go beyond physicality and become intertwined with all those forms of boundary-making that are not physical or territorial but operate through narratives, representation, institutional practices, and social norms, producing real and consequential forms of inclusion and exclusion in these specific receiving societies.

2.5 Who is Narrating Migration [in Times of Crisis in Border Societies]?

Narratives, and claims embedded, have actors creating them, claim-makers. In my dissertation, I understand a claim-maker as an actor making specific claims embedded in the narratives that

I analyze. Makers are often political actors in the broader sense, and they may make claims in the name of a group (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). However, as you will read in the pieces of research carried out in this dissertation, any actor can make a claim in name of an individual or a group in society. The aim here is to show that any actor has the potential to become a claim maker, bringing forward narratives with specific claims embedded, which may or may not be spread and accepted by a broader audience. Claim-makers can be part of a societal group, as in the case of my article carrying out ethnographically-informed interviews with a specific social class in two urban contexts of Northern Italy; they can be migrants themselves, in the case of my article investigating the representation and activism of a migrant (later politician) going through a societal bordering process in the context of the receiving society of Italy. Moreover, claim-makers can be institutional and political actors at the local, national and regional (EU) levels, as in the case of my article on the *borderscapes* of Ceuta and Melilla, but also associations and organizations of the civil society of the border.

Particular attention in this dissertation was given additionally to the media: the media – be this mass media or social media – can also be claim-makers in their own right, but – more importantly – play a key role in connecting makers to an audience, providing a platform for some claims and not others (Marino & Ruedin, 2023; Reese & Shoemaker, 2017). The role of mainstream media in reporting narratives, and claims within them, on migration has been discussed at length in section 2 of this Chapter 2 “Narratives of Migration” (p. 16). Media are thus considered here not only as potential claim-makers, but also – and more often – claims-amplifiers. Mainstream media decide on reporting specific claims which will be shared with a broader public, the more mainstream and read the newspaper outlet is. Behind this, the choice to include in this dissertation a conceptual article elaborating on the understanding of claim, claim-making and claim-sharing and seven articles investigating narratives by political actors, societal actors, non-governmental civil society organizations, migrants and mainstream media outlets.

To give a clearer outline of the actors taken into consideration in this dissertation, I elaborated Table 6. which reports the key actors across the seven empirical articles of this dissertation.

Table 6. Key actors analyzed in the seven empirical articles of the dissertation

Article	Main Actors Analyzed
1. ‘A tale of two cities’: Migration and resentment through the eyes of shopkeepers in Lombardy	Shopkeepers; Local residents; Political elites (as narrated culprits); Emigrants (“best

Article	Main Actors Analyzed
	Italians”); Immigrants (“less deserving foreigners”)
2. Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro’s Activism in Italy	Aboubakar Soumahoro; Migrant activists; Media; Political elites; Migrants as categorized subjects
3. Distrusting ‘them’ and creating ‘us’: migration and the uses of the past by populist radical right parties in southern Europe	Populist radical right parties (Fratelli d’Italia, Vox, Chega); Political elites (as targets of blame); Emigrants; Immigrants; “The people”
4. Shaping European Borders Beyond Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Two Spanish <i>Borderscapes</i>	Spanish state; EU institutions; Border authorities; Local NGOs; Grassroots associations; Migrants; Local communities
5. Framing Migration and Migrants Through Border Crises: The Case of Ceuta and Melilla	EU actors; Spanish government; Moroccan authorities (implicitly); Independent & activist organizations (IAOs); Media; Migrants
6. Narrating crises of Europe’s southernmost <i>borderscapes</i>: the case of Melilla and Lampedusa	Mainstream media; Journalists; National governments (Italy, Spain); EU institutions; NGOs; Migrants; Local communities
7. The Border Remembers: Civil Society’s Commemorative Acts in the Mediterranean Borderlands of Melilla and Lampedusa.	Civil society groups; Survivors; Families of victims; Local communities; Activists; National institutions; Participants in commemorative rituals

Chapter 3. Methods²

The empirical part of this dissertation employs a variety of different research methods. Across the empirical articles, my research has employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches, though qualitative methods remain the central basis for data collection and analysis. In this section, I will first give a brief outline of the methods chosen for each article: this has to be considered as a basic overview that is, however, not nearly as detailed as the methodology outlined in the articles themselves. The reader might here notice the diversity of data collection and analysis methods. The reason behind these methodological choices is related to the needs of each specific piece of empirical research that compiles this dissertation. Moreover, this methodological diversity also stems from the understanding of my doctoral journey as a conceptual and methodological opportunity to delve deeper in diverse approaches.

Across the empirical articles, the methodological choices are complementary. Each method ideally captures one side of migration narratives production and, in some cases, contestation. These diverse methodologies have allowed me to analyze narratives across scales (micro, meso, macro) and contexts (urban space, activism, media, institutions, borderlands), showing how different methods highlight different insights on the same phenomenon. While still being mainly a qualitative researcher by training, one of the many reasons behind the pursuing of such a research path was set in the eagerness to get closer to diverse approaches to investigate/answer a specific research question. From this, the decision to collaborate with colleagues part of the nccr – on the move network and beyond. This dissertation finds itself at the intersection of social and political sciences, with important reflections in the realm of normative political theory. Such an interdisciplinary thesis demands the use of diverse methodologies.

This dissertation's methodological approach is a statement regarding my academic development and profile: I posit that employing a diverse range of methods is advantageous when examining phenomena that appear differently across contexts and moments, often producing diverse insights. Bridging diverse disciplines and their methodologies is a key step in trying to make sense of specific phenomena and their representation in times of struggle. Before delving deeper into the outline of the methodologies utilized throughout my project, I see the need to make my epistemological stance more explicit. My work is grounded in

² All further details regarding methods of data collection and analysis are shared in the articles themselves and in the articles' codebooks, available open access on Zenodo. Links to each codebook can be found in Part II of this dissertation, on each article's title page (except for Empirical Article VII whose codebook has not yet been produced).

constructivism in the way it conceives human knowledge not as an objective, neutral portrayal of social reality but as something created through narratives and social life itself, shaped by historically embedded power relations. It takes inspiration from radical democratic theory scholarship in the way it conceives human knowledge as having the potential to be continuously contested by actors across scales. That said, I want to clarify something crucial, which will be elaborated further in this piece's conclusion through a reflection on the concept of principled pragmatism: the aim of my work is to stem reflexivity and avoid a skeptical, cynical approach. I do not contend that, since human knowledge is subjective and plural, a journey of search and production of knowledge does not matter. On the contrary, it is because it is plural that knowledge needs to be investigated further, together with the actors and the contexts in which such knowledge is developed. This is to clarify that I do not see subjectivity and plurality as limitations on the potential of human knowledge, but rather as strengths. When we consider that knowledge is not neutral, we might give importance to previously disregarded perspectives, which, in some contexts, can be beneficial to social life. We give a certain intrinsic positivity to objectivity, which is hardly reflected upon, but why would knowledge be seen in a positive light only when its premises are shared by a large number of people? While there are observable events in reality, their interpretation can be subjective in human beings, a capacity that has created the richness of knowledge we have today. What is true, however, is that interpretation is plural but not arbitrary: there are principles and values that have been developed in relation to the production of knowledge over centuries, and they are not rejected through this approach. In fact, a reflexive approach in constructivism recognizes such principles and reflects on their legitimacy in the specific contexts analyzed.

Nevertheless, it is also crucial to reflect on the politics of knowledge. While knowledge is plural, there are epistemological traditions that have greater visibility and have developed greater legitimacy over time. The very aim behind this dissertation has, from the start, been to investigate dominant forms of narrating migration and potential alternative narratives or narratives that not only present some new perspective but at the same time go actively against the dominant ones (counter-narratives). As a result, this dissertation understands the political aspect of knowledge production as it also understands narratives as political acts: knowledge [as well as narratives] is produced within unequal power relations, unequal access to places of visibility [through which knowledge is shared], where some institutional and media actors, for example, develop epistemic authority while other perspectives are marginalized and *invisibilized*. Recognizing these asymmetries has also meant getting acquainted with diverse methods of data collection and analysis as a way to reduce – or at least reflect on – them in the

process. Behind this consideration stands this dissertation's very aim to investigate dominant and alternative (counter-) narratives, understand how they interact, and do so through a diverse range of methods.

3.1 Methods of data collection

a. Databases

Databases generally serve – and served me through this doctoral journey – as organized repositories compiling information from a specific (in the case of a specific newspaper's database) and/or multiple sources (in case of platforms such as Nexis Uni/LexisNexis Academic which allow researchers to access documents from newspapers, magazines, newswires, blogs, and transcripts globally).

In my dissertation specifically, Empirical article II used newspapers' databases to collect articles published in Italian media outlets (more specifically, databases of La Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Giornale, and Il Manifesto). Empirical article III collected documents ranging from reports and press releases to news and blog pieces in the databases of eight actors (more specifically, the Policía Nacional, the Guardia Civil, the Ciudad Autónoma de Ceuta, the Ciudad Autónoma de Melilla, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), No Name Kitchen and Asociación Elin) which, I argued, represent the European, national and local level of the border. Empirical article V utilizes databases to collect newspapers articles, making use of LexisNexis, the platform mentioned above, to retrieve newspapers articles in the case of Spain and Italy. Within LexisNexis, I followed a specific procedure of advanced search: in the Spanish case, the key word utilized was Melilla and the time frame was specified from the day of the event taking place (the Massacre of Melilla took place on the 24th of June 2022) until a week after (1st of July 2022). The selected source location was Spain, the selected language source was Spanish, the type of source “newspapers and newswires and press releases” and the selected media outlets within the Spanish context were EFE, El País and El Mundo (with online versions). In the Italian case, the key word utilized was Lampedusa and the time frame was specified from the day of the event taking place (the Lampedusa shipwreck took place on the 3rd of October 2013) until a week after (10th of October 2013). The selected source location was Italy, the selected language source was Italian, the type of source “newspapers and newswires and press releases” and the selected media outlets within the Italian context were ANSA Notiziario Generale, Corriere della Sera and La Stampa (with online versions). Empirical article VII is the last to make use of databases as method of data collection in this dissertation: in this article, I conducted the analysis of populist radical right parties' manifestos for Italy, Spain and

Portugal latest general elections (2022, 2023, and 2024), which were retrieved from the databases of the parties' websites (i.e., Fratelli d'Italia, Lega Nord, Vox, and Chega).

Databases as method of data collection offer an organized, standardized aggregation of data which allow researchers to analyze and compare information, for example, across time and contexts. The collection of data through databases is gathered according to criteria which can be more easily replicated which ensures transparency and reproducibility to a larger extent compared to, for example, interviews and fieldwork as methods of data collection. Databases are pre-existing collections of data, put together by specific institutions. It can be very convenient and helpful to use them when looking for a specific perspective (e.g., database of a specific newspaper to investigate the framing in this specific newspaper). However, it is important to underline that, being compiled by specific institutions, databases often report perspectives of those specific institutions around a phenomenon. As a result, in my dissertation, I utilized databases as method of data collection exactly when I wanted to investigate specific institutional/mainstream media perspectives which do not report too many nuances on the occurrence of a specific event nor people's/communities/societal lived experiences regarding a specific event. My specific use of databases, multiple databases from different news outlets and institutions, however, added the nuance I needed in these specific investigations which could not rely on single institutional lens.

b. Interviews

Interviews are a method of data collection which involves direct, prompted conversations between the researcher and participants to elicit information that cannot be captured through observation or structured datasets alone. Interviews are an interactive method and, even when prompted and prepared in detail by the researcher, they are co-constructed and flexible in the way they develop. As the researcher shapes the interview through prompts – as I did in my research – the interviewee shapes it through their responses, which convey their specific perspectives and interpretations.

In this dissertation, interviews were used as primary method of data collection and as a triangulation method. In empirical article I, I gathered data through thematically semi-structured interviews with the selected urban social group, together with a series of observations of the urban contexts located in Lombardy, Northern Italy. The aim was to capture specific emotions in the narratives I was collecting, generated from lived experiences of this specific social group in two Italian urban contexts: interviews as data collection method is in fact extremely valuable to understand experiences, interpretations, motivations behind perspectives, and meaning-making processes. In empirical article III, I used interviews conducted with

representatives of civil society's organizations (CSO) to triangulate my data on the approach of framing of migration in moments of crisis by these CSOs: these interviews allowed me to delve deeper into the humanitarian border approach through the representatives' accounts, experiences and understandings of migration on the specific context of the border in moments defined as of crisis.

Interviews could provide an in-depth analysis of people's experiences and interpretations of reality and phenomena and uncover nuances in investigations, which structured data often flattens. As a result, as a method of data collection, they provide interpretive and meaning-centered data, which makes them instrumental for investigations seeking to understand lived experience and contested understanding of social phenomena.

c. Fieldwork observations

In this dissertation, fieldwork observations were crucial in the aim of witnessing social life as it unfolds and of connecting with the societies/geographical scopes I decided to investigate when I started this doctoral journey. Fieldwork observations involve engagement in a specific social setting to document behaviors, interactions, routines, and environments. Carrying out fieldwork observations for my research, I spent time physically present in the setting where the events I wanted to analyze occur and the people I wanted to observe engage in social life. In empirical article I, I carried through fieldwork with "ethnographic sensibility" (Herzog & Zacka, 2019), which refers to fieldwork which is concerned with "how people perceive, think about and ascribe meaning to their environment and behavior" (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 764)³. In this context, as already briefly mentioned in the interviews section, I developed prompts as interview guidelines to keep the advantages of ethnographic flexibility while being aware that the chosen contexts might spontaneously shape my line of questioning. Throughout the conducted fieldwork, I kept weekly reports with my co-author, co-investigator, Dr Sara de Athougua Filipe, which allowed the two of us – while in two different cities – to jointly reflect on and recalibrate the approach when needed. This experience was a crucial first step which trained me to be able to carry out fieldwork by myself, thanks to the precious guidance of Dr Sara de Athougua Filipe: in fact, in the course of 2025, I conducted fieldwork on my own for what would be today empirical article VII, where I used fieldwork as a method of data collection to gather data that I then later analyzed comparatively regarding commemorative acts occurring

³ I refer here to *ethnographic sensibility* to clarify the context of my fieldwork, as my approach should not be regarded as a full ethnographic study. I used characteristics of ethnography such as interpretive focus and sensitivity to meaning making, embedding them within a political science and sociological framework. This approach allowed me to focus on actors' interpretations and experiences of their context and, at the same time, to maintain a scope and duration aligned with my research questions and disciplinary context.

in two borderlands situated in the Central and Western Mediterranean Sea. The concept of fieldwork through “ethnographic sensibility” was here, again, extremely useful as it involved being interested in what people do as well as why they do it in these contexts, being concerned with how they perceive, think about, and ascribe meaning to the specific context and a specific attention to the geography and construction of the border context in this case. For this specific empirical article, I collected data in three steps: firstly, during contact with the organizations on the ground; secondly, through observations of the commemorative acts’ organization a few days before they took place, and thirdly, through observations and recorded notes during the commemorative acts.

In conclusion, the data collection methods employed across this dissertation reflect a commitment to methodological pluralism. By combining databases, interviews, and fieldwork observations, I aimed at capturing the ways in which narratives of migration in moments which are claimed as disruptive are constructed and experiences across contexts. This diversity is not merely instrumental for this project; it was also intended to mirror the complexity of the object of study in my doctoral endeavors and underline the interdisciplinarity in which this dissertation is situated. Embracing different methods of data collection (and later on of data analysis) has allowed me to approach each empirical question with the most suited tools, while also shaping my development as a researcher capable of navigating and integrating various epistemological perspectives.

3.2 Methods of data analysis

This dissertation adopts a multi-method approach to both data collection and analysis. The methodological framework spans multiple scales (local, national, supranational), incorporates diverse document types (media, manifestos, commemorations, institutional documents), and utilizes a range of analytical tools (quantitative computational structural topic modelling, claim analysis, critical discourse analysis). This section details the analytical methods employed, reflecting my opportunity to experiment with approaches from disciplines that rarely intersect. The dissertation demonstrates that methodological interdisciplinarity is achievable, though it is time-intensive and complex, requiring extensive methodological training for a single researcher. Within the context of nccr – on the move, this endeavor was facilitated by collegial support, collaborative opportunities, and a stimulating learning environment. These methodological choices underscore the necessity of interdisciplinarity for understanding social complexity. My argument is not that researchers should be omniscient, which is unrealistic, but rather that academia should foster inter-disciplinary engagement, allowing for diverse conceptualizations and operationalizations that lead to varied methods of data collection and

analysis. This dissertation thus serves as a call for increased cooperation and collaboration among disciplines within social sciences and migration studies.

a. Quantitative Methods in Mixed Methods Approaches: Structural Topic Modeling

In my article, “Framing migration and migrants through border crises: the case of Ceuta and Melilla,” I employ a mixed-methods, multi-level framing analysis that integrates quantitative computational text analysis (Structural Topic Modeling, STM) with qualitative interpretation. This approach examines how various institutional actors frame migration and migrants over time, contrasting dominant framings with alternative narratives from grassroots organizations. STM is applied to inductively identify thematic frames in documents collected from selected actors, followed by qualitative analysis to interpret the articulation and contextualization of these frames.

Within this mixed-method approach, the initial analytical stage involves STM, a probabilistic text-mining technique that identifies latent themes across datasets while incorporating document-level metadata such as author and date. Although STM is typically applied to large datasets, I utilized it with a smaller dataset due to the scope of data collection. Multiple model specifications were tested, resulting in the selection of a 20-topic model. Topic-level word scores were examined, and the 20 topics were subsequently grouped into three broader frames through qualitative interpretation. STM also facilitated analysis of how frame prevalence varied over time and among different actors, enabling the detection of shifts in framing during crisis periods, differences among actors (such as municipalities, police forces, and civil society organizations), and the evolution of framing from crisis moments to their aftermath. A method such STM was needed to carry out the inductive analysis of themes and, more importantly, identifying time and actor-specific changes that would be difficult to detect through qualitative reading alone, while qualitative analysis was utilized to understand more in detail how the frames operate as narratives, how they are articulated in moments of crisis and how terms were differently used qualitatively by different actors.

Following the computational identification of frames, I conducted a qualitative close reading of documents to verify the use of key terms within complete statements. This step was essential to ensure contextual accuracy and the correct interpretation of claims within the documents.

b. Qualitative Methods

Although quantitative methods are incorporated within the mixed-methods framework, the majority of the research conducted over the past four years is qualitative. The empirical papers employ a range of qualitative methods, primarily for text analysis, reflecting the dissertation's focus on narratives. The following sections elaborate on qualitative text analysis methods, the application of a theory-driven comparative study approach, and the analysis of fieldwork observations, including aspects beyond textual or verbal data.

The qualitative framing analysis in this dissertation centers on claims identified within media, manifestos, and other documents both in my article "Framing migration and migrants through border crises: the case of Ceuta and Melilla" and in my article "Narrating crises of Europe's southernmost *borderscapes*: the case of Melilla and Lampedusa." Because the analytical framework central to this dissertation conceptualizes narratives as being composed by claims, I needed to identify claims to then examine how actors create and challenge narratives in moments claimed as of crisis. Claim analysis within this framework involves extracting statements made by actors or reported by the media, focusing on the description of events, the attribution of causality, identification of responsible parties, and calls for action or governance. This analysis was conducted through manual, interpretive coding.

In my articles, "'A tale of two cities': Migration and resentment through the eyes of shopkeepers in Lombardy" and "Distrusting 'them' and creating 'us': migration and the uses of the past by populist radical right parties in southern Europe," the qualitative analysis relies on deductive, emotion-based coding, specifically targeting emotions such as distrust and nostalgia. Terms were coded according to predefined emotional categories, consistent with their theoretical conceptualizations. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed in these two studies, though not in its traditional form. The methodology incorporates selected components of CDA (see Cap & Hart, 2014; Wodak, 2024), utilizing a qualitative, emotion-discursive lens to interpret claims through predefined emotional dimensions. This approach examines how affect shapes the creation of meaning and the attribution of blame in the selected narratives. The analysis explores how emotions such as discontent, nostalgia, and distrust are articulated in claims, contributing to the construction and dissemination of grievances. It also connects everyday narratives to broader societal developments, links micro-level narratives to macro-level power relations, and demonstrates how normative expectations are shaped through narrative. The method remains deductive, seeking specific emotions in narratives based on theoretical conceptualizations. Additionally, CDA's focus on power structures is reflected in the analysis of how migrants' categorization, counter-categorization, and re-categorization

influence political subjectivity and societal bordering, elements which were investigated at length in my article “Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro’s Activism in Italy.” Given the focus of these papers’ research questions on emotional dimensions of narratives and power structures playing a role within narratives, CDA, a method which is utilized to uncover how power structures and emotions have a role within narrative construction, felt at the time the most suited.

In my article “The Border Remembers: Civil Society’s Commemorative Acts in the Mediterranean Borderlands of Melilla and Lampedusa,” claim analysis was supported by semiotic analysis of narratives conveyed through commemorative acts. In addition to analyzing speech acts as communicative units and vehicles for claims, I examined their repetition and the use of specific figures of speech that enhance meaning. Semiotic analysis focuses on both the content of the message or claim and the effectiveness of its delivery through rhetorical devices. Common devices identified in speech acts include repetition, personal experiences, metaphor, and metonym (Catalano, 2011). Consequently, the analysis investigates the presence and function of figures of speech, such as metaphors and metonyms, in shaping meaning and conveying claims more effectively. Semiotic analysis was chosen as method given the study’s focus on both speech acts and rituals. Semiotic analysis provides the researcher with the tools to focus in-depth on the message delivered and how it is delivered through specific devices (Catalano, 2011; Marino, forthcoming), which is extremely helpful in case of in-person speeches and speech acts that involve symbolism and rituals.

My article “Shaping European Borders Beyond Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Two Spanish *Borderscapes*” employs a qualitative, theory-driven case study approach that integrates interpretive document analysis, secondary sources, and field observations to examine bordering processes in two specific case studies. Each case is presented individually, followed by a comparative analysis grounded in *borderscape* theory to identify both shared and divergent structural dynamics at the local level and to draw broader conclusions at the national and regional (EU) levels. The core analysis involves interpretive examination of policy documents, reports from non-governmental and civil society organizations, and evidence from existing literature, all analyzed using key concepts from border studies, such as *borderscape*, physical and non-physical bordering, and processes of border externalization and securitization. Fieldwork observations and notes are incorporated to capture everyday bordering practices, their implications, and to highlight discrepancies between policy and lived experience within migration regimes. The analytical framework is explicitly based on *borderscape* theory, which conceptualizes borders as dynamic, multi-layered, and socially constructed. This theoretical

perspective structures the analysis, enabling connections between local developments and the EU-level migration regime, and interpreting bordering as a set of evolving practices.

3.3 Writing an article-based thesis at the intersection of sociology and political theory

In October 2022, soon after starting my PhD, I decided my dissertation would be written by article. This choice responded to the need to have flexibility in order to address the different research questions that I outlined from the broader project's research questions asking how migration and migrants are narrated through moments of crisis and if we can identify dominant and alternative narratives and, in that case, how. The several articles developed responded to the need to answer specific questions that would help me shed light on these broader, more overwhelming questions and operationalize broad concepts such as narrative (dominant and alternative) and crisis. My dissertation is thus composed of several stand-alone but interrelated articles, each contributing a distinct analytical angle to the overarching research project and questions. An article-based dissertation would also allow me to express myself at best in my interdisciplinary effort.

My research project broader questions were thus restricted and made accessible to specific cases so that concepts operationalization could also be more feasible, efficient and clear both to me as a researcher and to the readers. Such a structure allowed me to engage with a specific empirical or conceptual problem, learn from and use a wide range of data analysis and collection methods, and speak to a broader range of disciplines within migration, border and citizenship studies since my project has the potential to speak to sociologists, political scientists and theorists, but also geographers and some political historians.

This format also mirrors the fragmented and multi-scalar nature of bordering processes themselves. Borders are not singular objects of study, but rather narratives, practices and institutional logics. Writing through articles enabled me to capture this multiplicity while maintaining coherence through a shared conceptual framework. In addition, writing a dissertation by article trained me in the importance of peer review and dialogue with scholars from diverse disciplines and in different career trajectories in the process of knowledge production and dissemination. Since the very beginning of my PhD, I have engaged with scholars in order to get review and feedback of my work, having been warned by many colleagues regarding the challenges of the publication process. As a result, since the submission of my research proposal, I sought feedback that would help me analytically clarify my work and aims.

Although each article stands on its own, the dissertation is designed as a coherent whole. This introduction outlines the theoretical framework, research questions, and methodological

approaches that bind the articles together. This introduction's conclusion synthesizes the findings, reflects on the findings' normative implications, and articulates the contribution of the dissertation as a unified project. The articles build the dissertation in the way they show how conceptual reflections were carried out and how the research questions have been answered to draw on specific empirical cases. Each one advances a specific empirical dimension of the broader inquiry – whether through a focus on bordering processes in narratives, the role of crisis narratives, or the emergence and essence of alternative and counter ones. Together, they form a cumulative argument about how bordering processes shape and are shaped by narratives, policies, and lived experiences.

Writing a thesis by article was also an exercise which showed me the temporal and reflexive aspects of research. Each article was developed at a different stage of my PhD journey, showing evolving theoretical reflections, methodological refinements, and focus on specific empirical cases. This temporal layering has been challenging at times: seeing the broader aim behind theoretical reflections implemented with specific methods in specific case studies was not easy and created doubts and deep questions on specific choices made. Delving more and more deep in my journey, however, showed that these constant questions and doubts ultimately helped me strengthen choices justification and the goals behind my project.

3.4 The importance of knowledge transfer in my PhD journey: Thinking Outside the Border

The creation of the booklet “Thinking Outside the Border” constitutes a methodological and epistemic contribution to my dissertation rather than just a – very important – story to tell. It is a methodological extension of my research design in that it puts three core aims into practice: multimodality, co-production, and engagement with audiences beyond academia. As a multimodal project, it combines knowledge of national and European Union policies and international law with visual storytelling and experiential accounts, expanding the range of perspectives through which bordering processes can be studied and challenging the dominant, purely textual or policy-driven representations of what happens at European borders in the Central Mediterranean. Arianna Sisani's illustrations are the center of this creation and show how visual methods are capable of revealing aspects of borders and bordering processes – embodiment, atmosphere, materiality – that words do not grasp in their entirety. The textual parts of this booklet are also intended for a non-academic audience. The goal, in fact, is to inform beyond the boundaries of academia.

In line with this important goal, this project was conceived as a co-production. It shows the collaboration with Simone Gavazzi and connects the researcher's (myself) knowledge of

policies and laws with his on-site experience of activism. As a result, this project shows how knowledge of this border-specific reality can be coproduced by multiple actors, including researchers, activists, and residents from local communities. In this case, incorporating Simone's experience and perspective enriched the project's methodological and analytical depth. In fact, rather than treating dissemination as a final step, I started my booklet project in the middle of my PhD journey, as I consider my knowledge transfer effort as an integral part of the research process. I consider translating academic insights and findings into more accessible formats as a methodological tool to verify the clarity of theoretical arguments, engage diverse audiences, give them space to inform research, and situate my academic work within broader societal debates.

Epistemically, "Thinking Outside the Border" questions how we think of borders and migration flows and how this claimed knowledge takes form, is shared, and, eventually, accepted by some audiences. Firstly, integrating illustrations, the experience of activism, and accessible narrative forms, the booklet expands the epistemic repertoire of border research. This project is a statement positing that visuals/imaginaries, lived experience, and engagement with the world outside academia are not secondary forms of knowledge but constitute legitimate sources of knowledge that reveal facets of the object of study that are not evident only to the researcher, to me. In addition, the booklet actively intervenes in the production of knowledge about borders. It challenges crisis-oriented, securitized, and dehumanizing narratives of migration and migrants, offering alternative perspectives through historical contextualization of the geographical area and normative reflections regarding the narratives and actions of the actors involved at the border. This epistemic contribution aligns with some of my dissertation's broader research questions: to analyze how migration and migrant are narrated through bordering processes and how alternative narratives have the potential to unsettle dominant ones.

This experience created the opportunity to share an epistemic, hybrid space where the researcher, the activist, and the artist met, showing how these forms of knowing can co-exist and create something meaningful and timely together. This project showed how epistemic hierarchies need to be questioned to better understand the social world around us and its phenomena. The scholar needs to learn from the lived experiences of the border resident and needs to get closer to the imaginaries of an illustrator to really grasp the broader meaning of their research.

Moreover, research on migration is deeply entangled with public debate and polarization at the political and social levels. In such a field of study, I contend, knowledge transfer efforts are even more key. Bordering processes/processes of categorization of migrants are produced

and re-produced through narratives, and their embedded claims, circulating far beyond academia; therefore, scholarly work investigating such narratives needs to engage with the spaces where they are potentially constructed, shared, and contested.

Chapter 4. Papers Summary and Broader Discussion into Clusters

Migration, Crises, and the Multilevel Politics of Bordering in Contemporary Europe

The articles collected in this dissertation offer a comprehensive, multilevel analysis of how migration is narrated and remembered (as a form of narrative) by a range of actors (political actors, civil society and the media) in two European border societies with a specific attention not only for the geographical physical borders, but also for non-physical processes of bordering in the cases of Spain and Italy. Across conceptual and empirical contributions, the dissertation advances a cumulative argument: migration is not simply a demographic or policy topic/field, but a deeply contested human phenomenon shaped by crisis narratives, bordering processes, and struggles over the right to move, live with dignity and belong versus the boundaries built through institutional migration practices and narratives.

By integrating conceptual reflections with empirical analysis, the dissertation shows how crises become powerful mechanisms through which migration is narrated as a problem, a threat, an intrinsic trait of our societies and an opportunity. It demonstrates that crises do not merely affect migration; they actively produce the meanings, hierarchies, and boundaries that structure migration regimes, the border and bordering processes.

The dissertation does not adopt a comparative design in the strict methodological sense, but the empirical articles are organized within one analytical framework. Each article analyzes a different narrative (and claims) construction, from non-physical bordering in Italian urban contexts, to migrant activism, to political and media framings in Spanish borderlands, to commemorative practices across Mediterranean *borderscapes*, yet all are connected within a specific framework, which advances a specific understanding of the concept of narrative, migration and borders – the framework outlined in this dissertation’s umbrella. The cases speak to one another as they reveal that similar narrative dynamics can operate across different territorial, institutional, and historical settings: the Italian cases, focusing on non-physical bordering, highlight the emotional, socio-economic, and political dynamics of narrative construction, while the Spanish cases highlight the role of physical borders and specific crisis events in shaping narrative creation and legitimation. The Mediterranean comparative studies (taking Italian and Spanish *borderscapes*) allowed me to further elaborate on these insights, showing how bordering imaginaries travel across contexts. When read side by side, the empirical articles show how migration narratives are created and challenged in Southern European border contexts: they analyze different contexts and actors through shared conceptual

lenses in an attempt to highlight the dynamics through which migration and belonging are narrated/counter-narrated across the region.

Here, I will present clusters which group articles based on the main concepts considered, their operationalization and findings. The first cluster is the conceptual one which groups the two conceptual articles which reflected on crisis, migration incorporating the inspiring lens of the Migration and Mobility Nexus (MMN). The second cluster reports articles which analyze how migration is narrated with a particular attention to emotions, expectations and struggles for recognition, revealing how non-physical bordering processes shape everyday encounters with migration and people on the move. It shows how bordering processes take place through the spread of specific narratives by political actors, at the public opinion level and also shows how these bordering processes have the potential to be contested. The third cluster reports articles which analyze narratives of migration in times of crisis at the geographical external borders of Europe. These articles delve deeper into the meaning of borders and explore the concept of *borderscape*, show how migration on these borders is narrated by a range of actors, and reflect in part on the implications for governance. In this cluster, I grouped articles that considered narrative of migration at the border, which include studies on the border and its historical development, the study of narratives of migration during specific crises at the border by diverse actors, the study of the narratives of migration through border crises by the media and the study of narrative as commemorative act of border crises and the way migration is narrated through these acts of remembrance. Across the cases, narratives are distinguished into dominant, alternative, and/or counter-. As outlined in Chapter 2, dominant narratives are those articulated or amplified by actors with institutional authority linked to a national-state understanding of belonging and, consequently, of migration. Alternative narratives offer different interpretations of migration without necessarily challenging dominant frames. Counter-narratives, by contrast, explicitly challenge dominant ones and advance competing claims.

The three thematic clusters presented in this chapter reflect both the dissertation's analytical structure and my own intellectual trajectory throughout the project. The first cluster focuses on conceptual work on crisis and the MMN, which served as the dissertation's theoretical starting point. The second cluster examines how bordering processes and narratives of migration are created and contested further away from the physical border, at national, urban, and political levels. The third cluster then turns to the empirical realities of the border itself, analyzing how physical and non-physical bordering practices interact in European *borderscapes*. The thematic clusters and the order in which they are presented here mirrors the development of the research process: the project began with a conceptual inquiry into the

meaning of crisis, moved to an analysis of how migration is narrated in political and societal arenas further from the border, and was then shaped by the intuition that the physical border, and the bordering practices it generates, play a central role in structuring these narratives. These clusters thus follow a coherent movement from a. conceptual foundations to b. narrative construction further from physical borders to c. the material and symbolic practices that constitute borders.

4.1 Crisis, Migration and the MMN

The two conceptual articles (Conceptual articles I and II) ⁴ establish the theoretical foundation for understanding migration as a dynamic process shaped by crisis claims and mobility regimes. This cluster reports the theoretical reflections at the heart of this dissertation, a reflection on the concepts that are later operationalized in the empirical articles. The first contribution expands the MMN by proposing a reflexive, multilevel framework that captures how crises reorganize relations between migration, mobility, and immobility. This approach challenges methodological nationalism by situating migration within broader mobility systems and by emphasizing how crises reshape these systems across experiences, practices, perceptions, and governance.

The second conceptual piece defines crises as *claims* – normative assertions that what *is* (the status quo) is different from what *should*. This follows claims that this situation requires urgent change. This framework outlines how disruptive events can be claimed as crises, how these claims circulate, and how they shape public understandings and policy responses.

Together, these conceptual contributions position migration as a phenomenon highly linked to processes of crisis claiming and aimed at reflecting on the understanding of migration and crisis in this dissertation together with an inquiry on the meaning of the migration and mobility nexus in this context. In fact, it is through this conceptual work that I familiarized myself with the lens of the MMN and learned how implementing it would be instrumental to my project. Firstly, by reframing movement as a part of a broader spectrum of social, economic, political and symbolic mobilities, the MMN does not treat “migrants” as a fixed, exceptional category and break the dichotomy between “migrant” and “non-migrant”. In addition, it highlights how national states create (im)mobility through specific narratives and practices choices. Such insights were important for my first approaches to the geographical scope of the border and border societies and the bordering processes. The MMN also reveals how there is a hierarchy in this spectrum of mobilities helping to identify how certain mobilities are *visibilized*

⁴ “Crises, Migration and (Im)Mobility: Towards a Reflexive and Multilevel Approach” and “Crises as Claims.”

as threatening and disruptive and (in)visibilized as simply “movement”. Underlining the fact that there is a hierarchy of mobilities and people on the move, who are classified in different ways (e.g., migrants versus expats) shed light on the way migration acquires a specific meaning as opposed to mobility, and especially in the chosen geographical scope (the Western and Central Mediterranean). Such hierarchy is behind the constant mainstream narrative of certain migration flows as disruptive and threatening, narratives that in their turn justify and normalize bordering narratives and practices. As a result, the MMN explores how mobility and migration are linked, amongst others, through an interplay where they are used as categories to determine and/or legitimize hierarchies of movements. As a result, it is a first step toward an effort to study migration by *de-exceptionalizing* it and underlining the implications of such hierarchical interplay.

The two conceptual articles were developed within the broader intellectual environment of nccr and they benefited from collective discussions. At the same time, my own contribution to their conceptual architecture was crucial. In Conceptual Article I, I contributed to developing the general theoretical section on crisis research, migration, and (im)mobility, the reflections on the MMN and the section on perspectives, attitudes and their effects. In Conceptual Article II, the core concepts and theoretical refinement were the result of a collaborative effort with Didier Ruedin. However, the definition of crisis claims as normative assertions and the analytical model of how such claims circulate reflect my own original contribution to the project.

4.2 Narratives of Migration through Emotions, Expectations, and Struggles for Recognition

The second cluster brings together three empirical articles (Empirical article I, II and III)⁵ which operationalize the process of categorization (societal bordering) and counter-categorization and the role of emotions within narratives by analyzing how migration is narrated through emotional registers, normative expectations of democracy, contested processes of categorization and migrant struggle for political subjectivity in receiving societies. Across different contexts and actors – specific social class in urban Lombardy, migrant activists, and populist radical right parties in the geographical scope of Southern Europe – migration emerges not merely as a demographic or economic phenomenon but as a symbolic terrain where specific emotions, identity construction, and political legitimacy are negotiated.

⁵ “‘A tale of two cities’: Migration and resentment through the eyes of shopkeepers in Lombardy, “Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro’s Activism in Italy” and “Distrusting ‘them’ and creating ‘us’: migration and the uses of the past by populist radical right parties in southern Europe.”

In two of the three articles in the cluster, emotions, in specific discontent, distrust, and nostalgia emerge as meaning-making devices in narratives that involve migration. In the context of northern Italy, the focus was on a specific social class, central to the development of the urban space, and how its members articulate resentful affectivities that fuse emigration (“the best Italians are leaving”) and immigration (“less deserving foreigners are arriving”) into a coherent emotional narrative of societal decline. In the case PRR narratives in the broader contexts in southern Europe, these emotions become a strategic resource: distrust which represents a central emotion in populist narratives is conveyed through the use of nostalgic narratives, presenting a sentimental longing for a glorified past that frames mobility as evidence of elite betrayal and national decay. Thus, these parties are able to build a distrust-framing narrative on both inward and outward mobility. Across these two cases, emotions give/are strategically used to give coherence to paradoxes (empty/crowded, deserving/undeserving, presence/absence) and mobilize grievances.

In addition, articles in this cluster reflect on normative expectations and disillusionment regarding democracies. Analyzing public narratives at the urban level in the context of northern Italy, it shows that resentment is tied to a sense that political elites have failed to protect or represent “ordinary people,” producing a narrative where inward and outward mobility becomes evidence of democratic erosion. PRR parties capitalize on similar expectations, channeling distrust toward institutions and elites while offering emotionally resonant explanations for mobility-related anxieties. While looking at the case of migrant activism, the one article analyzes how democratic ideals of equality and representation are unevenly applied, revealing the democratic deficits embedded in categorization and belonging.

Key concepts brought forward by the articles in this cluster are one of categorization, belonging, and the challenge of societal bordering and migrants’ struggle for political subjectivity. Narratives of migration in fact categorize who is deserving to be seen, valued, and deserving to belong. This cluster shows how narratives regarding migration hierarchies of deservingness of people on the move: for example, the public interrogated in the urban space of northern Italy more often than not positioned emigrants as valuable and immigrants as threatening, reinforcing symbolic boundaries of belonging. In this case, by distinguishing between desirable/deserving and undesirable/undeserving inhabitants, residents of the two cities give coherence to empty-crowded paradoxes. Emigration and immigration are, here, articulated into resentful affectivities very much as the two sides of the same coin – the “best Italians” are leaving while less desirable/deserving foreigners are arriving. While the case of Soumahoro’s activism demonstrates how migrants attempt to re-signify imposed categories,

seeking political visibility while navigating the risk of reinforcing outsider status. PRR narratives, on the other hand, weaponize categorization by defining a “virtuous people” against threatening “Others,” using migration to redraw ethnonational boundaries. Across these works, categorization is shown to be performative: it shapes access to rights, political subjectivity, and the frontiers of the imagined community. The analysis of the Soumahoro’s case was also an attempt to show how contestation between narratives plays out: Soumahoro’s activism is analyzed as a form of counter-narrative: this case illustrates how struggles over visibility, legitimacy, and political subjectivity materialize in practice, even if the empirical works in this dissertation do not systematically trace the broader dissemination process of these narratives.

In all three contributions we can see how migration (and mobility) is not a neutral social phenomenon, rather symbolical and political. Emigration and immigration (outward and inward mobilities) are intertwined in narratives of loss, threat, and decline. Emotions generated by societal paradoxes of our times, such as distrust and nostalgia, are utilized by PRR parties to legitimize exclusionary politics when it comes to narratives of migration. However, such narratives legitimizing exclusionary politics have always the potential to be challenged. Societal and political borders which perform processes of inclusion and exclusion position migrants as outsiders and portray them as failing to meet normative expectations. Migrant activism can re-signify these portrayals, challenging dominant external categorizations. Migration becomes thus the phenomenon whose narrative shows us how societies negotiate who belongs, who does not, how such definition can be challenged and what societal future is imaginable.

4.3 Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Collective Memory at European *borderscapes*

This cluster brings together four empirical articles (empirical article IV, V, VI, VII)⁶ that operationalize the concept of *borderscape*, narrative of crisis more in specific together with the concept of counter- and alternative narratives and commemoration as narrative developing through time. They examine how narratives of migration crossing European borderlands (*borderscapes*) are created, shared, and contested. Across different geographical locations – Ceuta, Melilla, the Canary Islands, Lampedusa, and the broader Central and Western Mediterranean – the main aim of the articles within this cluster is to reflect on how borders go well beyond their role as territorial demarcations. Together, the articles reveal a dynamic

⁶ “Shaping European Borders Beyond Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Two Spanish Borderscapes”, “Framing Migration and Migrants Through Border Crises: The Case of Ceuta and Melilla”, “Narrating crises of Europe’s southernmost borderscapes: the case of Melilla and Lampedusa” and “The Border Remembers: Civil Society’s Commemorative Acts in the Mediterranean Borderlands of Melilla and Lampedusa.”

interplay between dominant – mainly securitized – narratives, counter-narratives, and memory-based practices of resistance, all of which contribute to the evolving politics of migration in Europe.

Empirical article IV conceptualizes the Canary Islands and the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla as EU *borderscapes* beyond Europe, where Spain and the EU experiment with intensified forms of migration management. These territories become testing grounds for securitization, militarization, and externalization, producing a governance model that, the article argues, is neither effective nor pragmatic. This experimental bordering creates a dominant institutional narrative of migration as a threat, territorial distancing that allows the European public (except for the local border residents) to overlook the implications of such experimental bordering for the lives of migrants, of residents and the future of these borderlands more generally, and a governance gap/vacuum that local civil society (non-governmental and grassroots organizations) are set to fill increasingly. *Borderscapes* are thus regions where, at the same time, a lot of national attention and governance are directed, but that also show institutional failure. These borderlands, the way they are narrated by institutions and mainstream media, shape imaginaries of migration across Europe, even very far geographically from the territorial borders.

Empirical article V deepens this analysis by examining how specific crises at the border (the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in this case) have an influence in the way migration is framed. Through a mixed-method framing analysis, it identifies two competing lexical borders: a managerial lexical border, which bureaucratizes migration and renders migrants as administrative objects and a humanitarian lexical border, articulated by independent and activist organizations, which foregrounds lived realities, ethical concerns, allowing for an approach of principled pragmatism.

These competing lexical borders reveal that, especially after disruptive events at the border, actors struggle and compete to define migration, migrants and legitimate narratives and practices. Independent activist organizations bring forward a lexical border concerned with the rights of migrants as human beings which challenges the dehumanizing effects of bureaucratic bordering and, as a result, considered as alternative to the dominant, institutional, bureaucratic lexical border.

Empirical article VI turns to media narratives of two crises at the border: the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck and the 2022 Melilla massacre. Through qualitative content analysis of claims in mainstream media, it shows how these events – though two amongst the many crises involving these borders – became symbolic turning points in shaping perspectives of migration

in the Mediterranean. The article reports how mainstream media amplify certain aspects of the crises while silencing others, translate local tragedies into national and European debates, reinforce dominant narratives of migration and migrants as threat, migration as tragedy and migrants as victims and these specific borderlands as objects of attention solely in relation to crises related to migration.

The article focuses on mainstream media representations as, it argues, its spread and popularity across the two selected countries contribute to how the national community far from these borders imagines borderlands, migration flows in these regions, and perceives migrants and their un/deservingness.

In the effort of a final focus on potential alternative narratives of such crises and narratives of migration through such crises, empirical article VII examines commemorative acts in Lampedusa and Melilla as narrative practices that evolve over time. Such narrative practices are implemented by actors of the civil society as national and supra-national institutions are generally not the actors organizing these commemorative acts – despite participating in some acts (and solely in the case of Lampedusa). Such commemorative acts have the potential to transform border tragedies into resources of collective memory and to become an alternative narrative to mainstream narratives in the way it challenges the report of crises at the border as punctual moments of disruption and without representing the implications for the future of the border and the people crossing it or residing on it. Such collective acts represent also a counter-narrative of borders not only as sites of control, national-state protheses for control of its territory but rather of community (and its mourning), solidarity, and social and political imagination.

Table 7. illustrating the clusters and the articles they group

Cluster	Article Titles
1. Crisis, Migration and the Migration–Mobility Nexus (MMN)	Conceptual (C) I: <i>Crises, Migration and (Im)Mobility: Towards a Reflexive and Multilevel Approach</i> C-II: <i>Crises as Claims</i>
2. Narratives of Migration through Emotions, Expectations, and Struggles for Recognition	Empirical (E) I: <i>‘A tale of two cities’: Migration and resentment through the eyes of shopkeepers in Lombardy</i> E-II: <i>Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro’s Activism in Italy</i> E-III: <i>Distrusting ‘them’ and creating ‘us’:</i>

Cluster	Article Titles
	<i>migration and the uses of the past by populist radical right parties in southern Europe</i>
3. Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Collective Memory at European Borderscapes	E-IV: <i>Shaping European Borders Beyond Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Two Spanish Borderscapes</i> E-V: <i>Framing Migration and Migrants Through Border Crises: The Case of Ceuta and Melilla</i> E-VI: <i>Narrating crises of Europe's southernmost borderscapes: the case of Melilla and Lampedusa</i> E-VII: <i>The Border Remembers: Civil Society's Commemorative Acts in the Mediterranean Borderlands of Melilla and Lampedusa</i>

This chapter's aim has been to outline the different conceptual and empirical arguments that comprise this dissertation. These articles illustrated how the conceptual frameworks of the MMN and crisis as claim provide the analytical foundation for examining how hierarchies of movement are constructed and legitimized, and how disruptive events have the potential to be claimed by more or less influential actors, and these claims spread, accepted, or rejected by an audience. Empirical analyses reveal how these hierarchies play out in everyday interactions, political discourse, and migrant activists' struggles for recognition and subjectivity. In this context, the selected European *borderscapes* illustrate how dominant narratives of threat, control, and bureaucratic understandings of the border and the people crossing or living it can coexist with alternative narratives of the border not simply as a militarized prothesis of the national state and the EU political project but rather as a place with a history (of migration), a community, and a memory. Borders thus function as sites of both the creation and contestation of migration and migrants' dominant narratives.

Conclusion: my attempt to bring forward a normative reflection

The analyses presented in this dissertation demonstrate that borders are not simply lines on a map, nor are they faraway protheses of national territory where the state ends and an undefined “beyond” begins. Rather, borders are constitutive elements of the democratic state: they are the sites where the state materializes its principles, enacts its narratives, and attempts – sometimes unsuccessfully – to deliver equality, membership, and democratic legitimacy. To think *beyond* the border is not to reject the state or advocate for a world without political boundaries, but to reconceptualize the border as a political institution whose meaning and function must be aligned with the foundational principles of the democratic state.

1. Narratives as Normative Frames

The primary objective of this dissertation has been to demonstrate that narratives do not merely describe reality; instead, they situate events, phenomena, and individuals within a moral framework. This is particularly evident in the ways migration flows and migrants are narrated. When migrants are narrated as “invasions,” “threats,” or “outsiders,” such linguistic choices implicitly position them outside the scope of democratic concern. The narrative thus becomes a normative act, defining the boundaries of belonging and empathy, and determining whether migrants are regarded as subjects of rights or as objects of management (Marino, 2025; Marino et al., 2024; Marino & Gianni, 2025; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025).

Consequently, narratives possess the capacity to generate and delineate the boundaries of democratic responsibility. Specifically, if borders are integral to the democratic state, then migrants who cross them should be encompassed within the state’s normative horizon. However, this inclusion can only become politically meaningful if it is narratively *vizibilized*/recognized. Dominant institutional narratives that position migrants as “beyond” the community (Marino, 2025; Marino & Gianni, 2025; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025) serve to legitimize violent practices that violate human rights at the border and normalize the suspension of such rights for migrants, thereby illustrating the selective application of democratic principles. In contrast, alternative narratives that frame migrants as *already within* the sphere of responsibility, highlight rights violations, and emphasize the need for institutional accountability, contribute to expanding the normative imaginaries of membership.

Thus, narratives have the capacity to establish normative expectations of membership, define criteria for belonging, and construct imaginaries regarding who may belong by virtue of their potential to “become equal.” Narratives play a critical role in bordering processes by drawing symbolic boundaries that often precede and justify material ones. Narratives embed

claims that have normative potential and, as such, shape ideas of what is legitimate, necessary, and morally acceptable.

This dissertation has also demonstrated that narratives influence who is recognized as a political subject within society. Mainstream and institutional narratives frequently depict migrants as: a) victims, pitied but seldom empowered; b) threats to national security; c) individuals instrumentalized for their economic contributions; and d) cultural others who must be either assimilated or excluded (Marino, 2025; Marino & Gianni, 2025; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025). However, migrants should be acknowledged as co-participants in democratic life and made visible as political actors, thereby enabling them to become co-creators of democratic equality (Marino & Gianni, 2025). Narratives, therefore, shape the *political ontology* of migrants, determining whether they are perceived as agents, rights-bearers, or mere objects of policy.

Narratives that emphasize shared vulnerability, interdependence, the historical development of migration, and the universality of rights enable the conceptualization of migrants as prospective members rather than perpetual outsiders. In this regard, narratives are not merely diagnostic but constitutive; they actively shape the inclusive political community envisioned as existing “beyond the border.” The notion that migrants exist beyond the border – and thus beyond democratic principles – is a narrative construction rather than an objective reality. Narratives determine who is included in the political community, who is entitled to equality, and where democratic responsibility commences. Rethinking the border from a normative perspective necessitates re-examining the narratives through which migrants, the state, and the concept of “Us” are imagined.

2. The importance of contexts and principles

The empirical chapters have shown that the *borderscapes* of the Central and Western Mediterranean, European borders beyond geographical Europe, are not marginal anomalies but serve as laboratories for the development of democratic principles that are narrated as intrinsic to European democracy. Both physical borders and non-physical bordering processes reveal tensions between the pursuit of security and the principle of solidarity, between national narratives and transnational mobilities, and between institutional responsibilities and civil society’s ethical concerns. The selected geographical contexts illustrate that borders are not static; rather, they are shaped and transformed by historical legacies and the everyday practices of those who inhabit, cross, and represent national and supranational institutions at these sites.

However, context alone is insufficient to guide democratic action. A normative framework is necessary, one that does not depend on ethnic myths of origin or exclusionary

national imaginaries, but is instead grounded in principles that are defensible, universalizable, and compatible with democratic equality.

The central principle at issue is, thus, equality – not as a natural fact, but as a political achievement. As Arendt observed, “Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization,” even when nature has not provided it (Waldron, 2010). Thus, equality is not a biological condition but a collective decision, resulting from an institutional commitment to treat individuals as rights-bearing members of a shared polity. Arendt was critical of the idea that the rights of citizens of the national state are a secondary construction derived from the previously existing institution of “human rights” that, in turn, provides the citizen’s rights and the national state with a universalistic principle of legitimacy. Her theory was rather that human rights are based on civil rights and not vice versa, drawing on the evidence that when citizens’ civil rights are destroyed, their human rights are destroyed as well. However, as underlined by Balibar (2010) the argument here is not one that only the national state can create rights, whereas human beings outside institutions do not have rights, but rather that there are no human beings outside the institution of the community. The importance of this realization is that we cannot separate the idea of rights from the historically produced idea of “the human” that political institutions generate. Political institutions create a particular idea of what “the human” is, and rights emerge from that construction. Rights are thus not timeless or pre-existing, rather they become meaningful *within* a historically specific political order.

Political institutions do not just *recognize* humans; they actively *produce* a certain (normative) understanding of what a human is. Following this, it is Arendt’s argument that every individual has the right to belong to humanity, namely the right to be visible, speak, and act in the world as an equal. However, human beings only become equal in an artificially (in the sense of human-made) built community. Drawing on radical democratic theory (Balibar, 2014; Rancière, 2004; Schwiertz, 2021b, 2021a), becoming equal always entails dissidence, namely challenging and redefining the idea of who belongs to the world, the built community where we can be visible, speak and act as equals. Civil disobedience is thus tied to the very possibility of constructing the human: according to Arendt (Petherbridge, 2016), civil disobedience is an attempt to *restore* or *reinvigorate* the political community (the *politeia*) when it is failing. This is in line with the radical democratic theory idea of democracy as an ongoing, conflictual process, despite the differences with the understanding of Balibar, for example, whose post-Marxist perspective puts emphasis on the fact that civil disobedience has the potential to be politically dangerous not because the state might punish the disobedient, but because the

disobedient might unintentionally damage the very political world they are trying to save (Balibar, 2010).

Having outlined these important points, I return to the central idea that political institutions construct a particular conception of “the human,” and that equality is achieved only within an artificially constructed, human-made community – an idea fully endorsed in this dissertation. From this perspective, the issue does not reside in the existence of the state or political institutions, which serve as guarantors of rights, arenas for enacting equality, and structures for democratic accountability. Rather, the problem lies in nativist, ethnic interpretations of the state – an approach that this dissertation argues is both normatively indefensible and empirically untenable, particularly in regions such as the Mediterranean, where centuries of migration and exchange have shaped social life. Recognizing this does not imply unqualified support for open borders. Instead, it calls for a shift from ethnic closure to principled pragmatism: a governance approach that respects rights guaranteed by democratic institutions while acknowledging the realities of migration, interdependence, and shared vulnerability.

Principled pragmatism maintains that practice should be guided by specific principles, while assessing the relative advantages and disadvantages of a given practice based on how these principles can best operate in a particular context (Jackson & Brunger, 2015). This approach evaluates practices by reference to contextual application of principles, rather than relying on pre-existing beliefs or ideals. Accordingly, principled pragmatism in evaluating narratives – and the claims they comprise – requires assessing practical advantages and disadvantages, rather than relying on a priori systemic or cultural preferences. This argument also draws on the concept of iterative contextualism (Modood & Thompson, 2018), which posits that both context and principles co-determine the requirements of justice. Iterative contextualism aligns with principled pragmatism, recognizing that “empirical consequentialism and ethical reasoning each has its own compelling logic” (Snyder & Vinjamuri, 2012: 438). As Snyder and Vinjamuri (2012) note, “justice does not lead, [...], it follows,” reflecting Modood and Thompson’s view that principles of justice emerge from the exploration of multiple contexts, rather than existing a priori.

3. The migrant as group member: becoming equal

If the border is an institution of the state, it is not external to the state but an integral part of it. Consequently, those who cross the border are not outside the sphere of democratic responsibility; they are already situated within the normative horizon of the polity. Recognizing the border as part of the state has profound implications for conceptualizing migrants. Migrants

are not external anomalies appearing at the threshold of the polity; rather, by crossing the border, they enter the domain where the democratic state's principles are operative. While they may not be full members, they are already subjects of the state's obligations.

This reframing positions migrants not as threats to the political community, but as potential co-participants in the ongoing project of democratic equality. Membership in a political group is not determined by ethnic inheritance, but by institutional recognition and political inclusion. Migrants achieve equality not through assimilation into a constructed national identity, but through incorporation into the system of rights and responsibilities that defines democratic membership.

The empirical analyses in this dissertation have demonstrated that borders and bordering processes are sites of contestation over the definition of "Us." The normative challenge is to ensure that this collective identity is defined not by exclusionary nativist imaginaries, but by democratic principles developed through an approach of principled pragmatism.

4. Why Beyond the Border?

To think beyond the border is to reject the notion that the border marks the limit of political responsibility and to recognize that the border is the site where the democratic state's principles are most rigorously tested. Democratic equality does not end at the coastline of Lampedusa or the fences of Melilla; rather, migrants who cross the border are in the domain where the state must justify its actions according to its own principles.

A democratic state cannot govern its borders through fear or ethnic exclusion. Instead, it must adopt principled pragmatism – a commitment to rights, equality, and accountability that adapts to context while maintaining normative foundations. The border is not a void or liminal space, but a site where the possibility of a more inclusive political community emerges, one in which equality is continually created, and the border becomes a locus of democratic responsibility rather than exclusion.

The perception of migrants as existing beyond the border – and thus beyond democratic principles – originates in the narratives constructed about them. The narrative surrounding migration is key to investigate because it shapes perspectives on the phenomenon and the human beings involved and influences responses at micro, meso, and macro levels. It is therefore imperative to develop a narrative on migration that is just, meaning it respects cross-contextual principles and reflects the lived realities of those involved. While perceptions of migration may not originate at the border, the border significantly shapes these imaginaries, which is why the empirical cases in this dissertation have mainly focused on such scope.

5. Important Limitations: What is Ahead for Research on Narratives of Migration?

While I have discussed at length the aims of this dissertation and what it has attempted to analyze, it is now important to explicitly mention what my project was not set and did not manage to do. The limitations to my project are several: underlining these will hopefully point toward promising directions for future research.

Firstly, the crisis as claim framework reflects on analytical dimensions that are then not always addressed in my empirical articles. For example, the argument advanced that crisis claims acquire meaning only insofar as they are addressed to, and potentially taken up by, specific publics underlines the role of the audience. This dissertation, however, did not aim to investigate audience reception and the diverse ways in which social groups, regions, or media ecosystems interpret crisis claims. While my conceptual work has aimed to create a framework that could be helpful to scholars investigating different moments of the crisis claim making process (for example the creation of claims within narratives, the dynamics of diffusion and/or audience reception) my empirical focus has been on how actors narrate migration, not on how these narratives are received, accepted, or rejected by broader publics. The counter-narratives examined in my empirical work are articulated in response to dominant narratives, but this does not amount to a systematic study of reception dynamics.

Secondly, the dissertation brings forward two border cases within two border societies of the European continent without offering a comparison of the two border societies wholly. The comparative component is present in several articles, yet it is not a feature shared by all of them: some papers analyse a single case study, while others include comparative elements that are specific to their empirical focus. For instance, the comparative analyses examine *borderscapes* (Melilla and Lampedusa) or compare political speech in selected populist radical right party manifestos across Italy, Spain, and Portugal. These comparisons yield valuable insights into how border imaginaries are constructed within each context and how radical right populism mobilizes migration narratives across Southern European or border-region settings. However, because these comparisons are tied to the specific empirical material of each article, they cannot be generalized to the two countries as a whole. The dissertation therefore offers context-specific comparative insights, rather than a systematic cross-national comparison of Italy and Spain. This represents a limitation of the project, while also pointing toward future research that could develop a more integrated comparative design across Southern European border societies.

Third, the dissertation reports the existence and content of dominant, alternative and counter-narratives, but could not evaluate their effectiveness. While I suggest that visibility in

mainstream media may enhance the diffusion of specific narratives, the empirical chapters do not analyse whether these narratives succeed in reshaping public debate, influencing policy, or how exactly they alter dominant frames. The project therefore contributes to identifying and conceptualizing, but leaves open the question of strictly measured impact, avenue for future research, especially in social and political sciences.

Additionally, the empirical articles do not offer a systematic analysis of transnational narratives and their spread. The broader transnational dynamics of diffusion and co-production are not analyzed in a way that could be defined as satisfactory. This constitutes an additional limitation of my work but also a direction for future more systematic research on the transnational production of narratives, on migration or other phenomena as well.

In addition to these substantive limitations, the dissertation's interdisciplinary and multi method design created struggles for me as a researcher and internal tensions for the work in itself. Working across qualitative and quantitative approaches, micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, and multiple disciplines means becoming acquainted with different epistemological assumptions and analytical terms. In addition, while I mentioned the advantages of an article-based dissertation, it is important to transparently highlight that this format mobilizes the method-best-suited to one specific question, which inevitably creates differences in analytical depth and conceptual emphasis. I do not believe these tensions undermine the whole project's coherence, but they do affect the scope of the claims I can make: my work presents an account of narrative production which takes into consideration the many facets of narrative, and, as such, it will never be able to present a single, unified explanatory model.

Despite the mentioned limitations, this dissertation addresses gaps in the existing literature on narratives, both more generally and, more specifically, on narratives of migration. It introduces a claims-based analytical framework that clarifies the structure of narratives and the normativity they perform. By examining commemorative acts, the dissertation also contributes to understanding how narratives evolve over time and how they can be shaped by memory work. Research on narratives of migration, more specifically, has also tended to focus on dominant narratives, leaving less explored the coexistence, interaction, and contestation of narratives across multiple actors and scales, including the contributions of civil society and migrants themselves. By developing a multilevel framework that situates narratives within Mediterranean histories and border imaginaries, this dissertation has shown how dominant, alternative and counter narratives are produced and interact in moments of crisis. In doing so, it offers a conceptual and empirical contribution to the study of migration narratives and opens

avenues for future research on audience reception, transnational co-production, and the measurement of their success.

This dissertation also addresses an extremely wide normative gap in existing works on narratives of migration. While literature on narratives of migration has expanded rapidly and insightfully in the last few decades, narratives are reported, but rarely normatively analyzed. This absence is felt as narratives around migration and migrants shape how the phenomenon and the people related to it are situated within social and political communities. The dissertation sheds light on the normative aspect of narratives analysis: it shows that borders and bordering processes are the sites where principles of democratic equality are most directly tested. In fact, when migrants cross a border, they enter the domain of the state's obligations and, at that moment, the narratives created about them play a key role in determining whether they are narrated (as threats, for example, or potential co-participants in the social and political community). In other words, narratives talk about who is imagined as belonging and on what terms. Consequently, this dissertation argues that the act of narrating migration is inherently normative and that a just way to do so must a. ground claims in rights, b. ensure accountability, while c. remaining sensitive to contextual complexities. Such a normative reflection has largely been neglected in the field. By making the normative dimension explicit, I show how narratives construct collective identities and social and political boundaries and I open space for a reflection on alternative imaginaries of social and political communities that may be more just in the context of contemporary Europe.

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Part II

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In this part II of the dissertation, you will find the conceptual and empirical articles presented and summarized in part I. This section also contains the English version of the abstract of the booklet created through my knowledge transfer project “Thinking Outside the Border”. The table of content here below lists the conceptual and empirical articles compiling this dissertation.

Conceptual Article I

Crises, Migration and (Im)Mobility: Towards a Reflexive and Multilevel Approach

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Abstract

Scholarly inquiry into the intersections of migration, mobility, and crisis has mainly focused on international migration. The scope of this scholarship underscores the continuing influence of methodological nationalism in the field. We argue for a broader exploration of mobility (and immobility) perspectives. Accordingly, we embrace an encompassing understanding of crises as particular events and structural conditions with rather “extensive and large-scale changes and effects” (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022: 5). We further adopt what Bösch et al. (2020: 5) call a reflexive perspective “in which the constructivist dimension remains acknowledged” without relativizing a more objectivist view of “the real causes and effects” of the crises in question. Our approach builds on the concept of the Migration-Mobility Nexus (see Piccoli et al., 2024) and its interplays (continuum, enablement, opposition, and hierarchy) to study the crisis-induced shifts between migration, mobility, and immobility. To understand the complex and potentially intertwined ways in which crises interact with the Migration-Mobility Nexus, we propose to combine a multilevel analysis of experiences, practices and agency, perceptions and attitudes, and governance.

Keywords

Crisis, Migration-Mobility Nexus, Objectivist, Constructivist, Governance, Attitudes, Practices

Introduction

Research on the interplay between crisis, migration, and (im)mobility is burgeoning, whether regarding crisis migration (Martin et al., 2014; McAdam, 2014), the politicization of migration

in times of crisis (Bitschnau et al., 2021; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022), or migration being constructed as a crisis (Ambrosini et al., 2019; Lindley, 2014).

Scholarly inquiry into the intersections of migration, mobility, and crisis has mainly focused on international migration, defined as the act of crossing national borders with the intention of establishing long-term residence, though short-term and circular migration are not entirely neglected. This focus on international migration has undoubtedly provided valuable insights into understanding how crises influence migration practices, discourses, and political responses to migration, as well as insights into understanding the construction of migration as a crisis in itself. However, the restricted scope of this scholarship underscores the continuing influence of methodological nationalism in the field (Dahinden, 2016; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), where the broader relationship between human mobility dynamics and crises remains insufficiently explored and conceptualized.

We argue that a broader exploration of mobility (and immobility) perspectives (Sheller & Urry 2006) is useful to fully understand the intricate relationship between human movement and the concept of crisis. We are inspired by existing efforts to formulate comprehensive interdisciplinary and widely cast approaches to understanding crises (e.g., Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022; Bösch et al., 2020) and by McConnell's (2020: 2) plea to "recognize and celebrate diversity of use(s) rather than seeking single definitions" of crisis, and in this paper, we present a reflexive and multilevel framework with which to study the impact of crises on migration, mobility, and immobility.

This reflexive framework – "in which the constructivist dimension remains acknowledged without having to relativize the real causes and effects" of crises (Bösch et al., 2020: 5) – is based on the analysis of the following three levels: 1) the experiences, agency, and practices of individuals; 2) the perceptions and attitudes of different actors in the public sphere (media, nongovernmental organizations and other associations, regional and local governments) ; and 3) the governance of and through crisis by different institutions (international organizations, national governments, local authorities, corporate actors, private organizations, and nongovernmental organizations). By referring to the Migration-Mobility Nexus (Piccoli et al., 2024) and drawing on examples from political crises such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic crises such as the recent Euro crisis, we argue that the focus on crisis is instructive for seeing social phenomena related to migration and mobility and the interplays between them (continuum, enablement, opposition, and hierarchy) that lie beyond the limit of methodological nationalism.

Crisis Research, Migration, and (Im)Mobility

Crisis Research in the Social Sciences

The occurrence of periods and events that are experienced as crises and the potentially controversial narratives of different actors that frame certain developments and situations as a crisis are part of human history and of our current time in particular. The increasingly obvious effects of climate change, the humanitarian plight unfolding in the context of the so-called refugee crises, and the global and manifold disruptions caused by the fairly recent COVID-19 pandemic are just a few examples of many crises that are ongoing at the time of writing.

Koselleck and Richter (2006: 381) argue that we have been able to speak of an “age of crisis (...) since the turn of the nineteenth century.” They justify this not by claiming that there has been a growing number of events that could be understood as a crisis, but because of the “frequency of its use,” that is, use of the word crisis. In a similar vein, Krasteva (2019: 6) points out that “nowadays, crisis has been assigned a central place in the conceptual arsenal by which the contemporary world is conceived and evaluated.” In social science research, the term crisis is referred to and theorized in multiple, flexible, and potentially divergent and partly vague ways (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022; Koselleck & Richter, 2006). And while the use of the word crisis, which comes from ancient Greek meaning a decisive moment or turning point, is widespread in many European languages, there are also many related words in various languages across the world which refer to similar conceptions and which should be taken into account.

To provide an initial orientation in our understanding of crisis, we broadly distinguish two (not necessarily contradictory) approaches to analytically using the notion of crisis in diverse fields of social science research. The first approach, in some strands of scholarship, mainly perceives a crisis as a structural characteristic or long-term condition of a given social, political, or economic constellation, that is, as something systemic. In the second approach, other researchers see specific events and processes as crises and either study their emergence, unfolding, and aftermath on different levels of social organization or focus on how and why crises are socially and narratively constructed and represented.

The first approach can be identified in literature that is mainly concerned with abstracting descriptions of social, economic, or political constellations from the macro level of social organization such as capitalism, international relations, or political structures. It understands such large constellations as being in a latent crisis or sees the occurrence of crises as a built-in effect of the structural constellations of social organization. Building on Marxist thought which understands economic crises as a recurring feature of capitalism, Habermas

(1976) argues in his early work that advanced capitalist development not only causes economic and ecological crises but also creates a crisis for the legitimacy of the liberal democratic system. For a variety of social and political reasons, authors like political scientist Castells (2018) see the model of liberal democracy as existing in a “crisis of legitimacy” which is able to erode established processes in democratic systems (Merkel, 2020). Beck’s (1986) seminal notion of the “global risk society” is folded into larger scholarly discourses on “modernity.” He coined the term “reflexive modernity” to refer to what he designates as a period in human history which entails uncontrollable risks and uncertainties at the global level – in terms of both their potential impact and their increased recurrence. Building on Beck’s work, Moralli and Allegrini (2021: S833) introduced the term “crisis society” to show that “we are nowadays facing an amplification of the key characteristics of the ‘risk society’ (...) and an increasing ‘embeddedness’ of such elements in our human conditions.” Other authors (e.g., El-Tayeb 2020) add a postcolonial perspective to this larger field of debate and point to the unequal, capitalist power structures, shaped by colonial continuities, in which the current global system is rooted and which render it inherently unstable and a constant producer of different (economic, social, ecological, and political) crises.

In some research, a structural perspective with a different emphasis considers “crisis” to be a continuity of everyday dynamics (Dobry, 2009), which can be studied at the level of individuals’ experiences. Such literature discusses the normalcy of crises by referring to case studies conducted in the Global North (e.g., Fassin & Honneth, 2022) but notably also in the Global South (e.g., Rydstrom, 2022). Depending on the specific circumstances, events that are perceived as global crises, like financial crises or the COVID-19 pandemic, can be experienced as aggravating already dire situations rather than as moments of rupture in their own right. Such a perspective therefore helps to reconsider the alleged globality of crises (Marino & Ruedin, 2023) as well as what “normality” is (Marino & Hategekimana, 2025).

A second strand of social science research shares an understanding of crises as specific, delimitable incidents. They are perceived as – real and/or constructed – “events” (Koselleck & Richter, 2006: 371) leading to a threatening situation that deviates from a state of normalcy (McConnell, 2020). A crisis may happen suddenly or have a slow onset. A crisis can vary in terms of duration, but at some point it is marked by a sense of “urgency” (Meyer, 2012: 272) that demands “decisions and choices” to be taken (Koselleck & Richter, 2006: 358). Thus, crises are often seen as critical turning points (Habermas, 1976) that potentially bring about change (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014; Koselleck & Richter, 2006). There are, however, variations where social research takes a more objectivist or constructivist stance on the crisis events being

investigated (McConnell, 2020). At one end of this analytical spectrum, studies start by taking a crisis as a fact and mainly focus on examining the causes and impacts of that crisis from various angles: why it came into existence, what effects it had, and what the responses to it were. Walby (2015: 14), for instance, defines a crisis as “an event that has the potential to cause a large detrimental change to the social system.” However, like much “objectivist” crisis research, Walby’s work (2015: 14) integrates a reflexive view by stressing that “[c]rises are both ‘real’, in the sense of actual changes in social processes, and socially constructed, in the sense that different interpretations of the crisis have implications for its outcome.” This implies an awareness of the politicization and securitization that often go hand in hand with the objectifiable emergence of a critical situation. As Kriesi et al. (2021: 2) point out, “[t]here is discretion, contingency and possibly even interest in turning massive policy problems into crises.”

Taken a step further, this conceptual spectrum also comprises scholarship that concentrates on the social construction of crisis in narratives, perceptions, and interpretations – often with a particular focus on the media, politics, and policy making. Seen from such a perspective, crisis is a “notion that gains substance through its dialectical relation to the empirical condition it seeks to explore” (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022: 480). Crises cannot be analyzed outside the discursive framework that defines and interprets them as such (e.g., Roitman, 2013), since “much of the meaning, power, and ultimate impact of a crisis are functions of the ensuing network of narratives” (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016: 9). Accordingly, crises can be analyzed as forms of “claims” (Saward, 2006) justifying the need to take immediate action (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). In this sense, crises appear to be defined by the ways in which they accumulate meaning by being analyzed as empirical events that happen across time and through space. As a result, the meaning of a crisis can be shaped, constructed, perceived, and understood differently by different societies and societal actors (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022; Masco, 2017).

Most contributions in both of these fields highlight specific aspects, representations, effects, or outcomes of a crisis event or condition. However, arguably, they struggle to sufficiently do justice to the dynamic, highly complex – real and/or constructed – nature of a crisis (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022) and the causal or temporal overlapping of different critical conditions, developments, and situations. This applies in particular to crises’ differential construction, the perception of them, and their impact on various levels of social organization (macro, meso, and micro) and on different groups of people.

Moreover, the very concept of crisis and the word itself are mainly Euro-American centered. As such, the conceptualization of crises is still mainly dominated by research and approaches that are developed in and mostly based on empirical evidence from the Global North. As Masco (2017: 65) puts it, “crisis” – and “normalcy” as its counterpart – is embedded in the “modernist Euro-American project,” both as a common-sense term and in the form of its varied mobilization as a scientific concept. De Sousa Santos and Meneses (2019: 43) argue, accordingly, that contemporary crises are foremost the crises of a particular world, “the dominant form of Euro-modernity (capitalist, rationalist, liberal, secular, patriarchal, white...).” This broadly mirrors the epistemological tradition of social science research, which is largely shaped by colonial continuities of knowledge production in academia (Bhambra, 2014). Hence, the postcolonial continuities immanent in the emergence, perception of, and management of international “crises” still call for critical reflection and empirical research. In addition, it is also important to consider phenomena that can be regarded as crises without naming them as such. This is particularly relevant for research conducted in and on the Global South, where words other than “crisis” might be used to refer to a similar concept. This is a limitation on much of the research on crisis, but the scope of this working paper will not allow us to address it in depth.

Crisis, Migration, and (Im)Mobility

When it comes to the interplay between crises, migration, and human (im)mobility, Lindley (2014: 1) points out that the notions of crisis and migration are contemporary buzzwords with “intriguing parallels. Both are often viewed as exceptional phenomena (...) [and] (...) threatening, crises as jeopardizing social systems and human welfare; migration as undermining the integrity of the nation-state and bounded identities.” These ideas are reflected in the frequent claims that we are in an “age of crisis” (Koselleck & Richter, 2006) and in an “age of migration” (de Haas et al., 2019), and both these terms are often seen as fundamental characteristics shaping contemporary societies.

Relatedly, the research on crisis, migration, and mobility is burgeoning and diversifying, and oftentimes the different potential angles mentioned above are adopted to understand crises. We broadly distinguish three main strands in this field of scholarly inquiry: the first focuses on how critical conditions and events lead to migration and mobility; the second analyzes how migration and mobility are reframed and politicized in times of crises; and the third studies how migration in itself is perceived as crisis.

In the first strand of research, we detect a tendency to understand migration and mobility as consequences of crises that is paired with a strong interest in policy making. For instance,

studies that have developed the concept of crisis migration (Martin et al., 2014; McAdam, 2014) look at how critical events such as humanitarian crises, climate change, etc. and “underlying structural processes” (McAdam, 2014: 10) trigger migration and affect human lives broadly and the mobility of humans more specifically. McAdam (2014: 10) further claims that “what constitutes a ‘crisis’ and spurs migration will depend upon the resources and capacity of those who move, as well as upon the ability of the state into or within which they move to respond to their plight.”

Crisis migration is often a key focus of the global governance of international migration, especially in light of the so-called migration-development nexus which considers how policies which seek to manage migration are aligned with those that focuses on reducing poverty in the Global South, and the other way around (Nyberg–Sørensen et al., 2003; Van Hear & Nyberg Sørensen, 2003). However, a more critical stance recognizes that “the connection between migration and development is the product of a political and scientific construction” and so is crisis migration (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013: 369). By fixating on crisis migration in the Global South, development actors have reproduced particular (neocolonial) imaginaries about what causes migration, where crises occur, and where migrants come from.

Relatedly, the second important strand of research stems from the scholarly literature studying the process of politicization, broadly understood as the act of transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics (Zürn, 2019). Within this field, a distinct line of inquiry has emerged that delves into the politicization of migration during periods of crises. These studies identify specific critical periods labeled as crises to explore whether these “moments of truth” (van Middelaar, 2016: 495) had an impact on the salience of and actors’ polarization regarding migration and examine the determinants of politicization and polarization.

Notably, Bitschnau et al. (2021) undertake an investigation into the politicization of immigration in Switzerland during the oil crisis of the 1970s and the later financial crisis of the 2000s. Their findings reveal a nuanced perspective, suggesting that crises, while not inherently escalating politicization, can serve as pivotal catalysts by creating fertile ground for its cultivation.

Concurrently, Hutter and Kriesi (2022) explore the politicization of immigration across Europe amid what is widely described as the 2015 “migration crisis.” Their research underscores the impact of this crisis on amplifying pre-existing trajectories of immigration politicization, and shows that the role of radical right parties is a major driving force of politicization. In many places, however, the distinction between the radical right and

mainstream right parties with regard to their politicization of migration is increasingly disappearing (Hadj Abdou & Ruedin, 2022; Norocel et al., 2020).

Third, there is abundant scholarship on how migration is framed as a crisis. Overall, social science research on migration crises examines “what constitutes migration crises and who and what defines them” (Menjívar et al., 2019: 2) and the resulting policy responses. In line with the rationales that play out when crises are politicized in general (see above), framing migration and mobility as crises can be instrumental. It may enable governments to “scapegoat” or “securitize” migrants “as a means of channeling domestic discontent and cementing the power of dominant elites” (Lindley, 2014: 17) and to “amplify a range of other agendas in regard to for example welfare crisis, national identity and anti-Europeanisation” (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022: 9).

A notorious case is the 2015 “migration crisis,” also called from a more critical perspective a “refugee (reception) crisis” (see Ambrosini et al., 2019). Several scholars (e.g., Carastathis et al., 2018; Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2014) have examined why and how the public sphere, including politicians, experts, and the media, perceived the arrival of mostly Syrian refugees in Europe as bringing about a crisis. A related and important strand of literature designates the EU’s failure to formulate a coordinated response to the arrival of refugees as the actual crisis (e.g., Lavenex, 2019; Panizzon & van Riemsdijk, 2019). The literature on migration and development also refers to the way crises are framed. For example, Almustafa (2022: 1065) proposes conceptualizing the “European crisis of migration” as emanating from a “crisis of protection” of refugees in the Global South.

Overall, the academic inquiry into the intersections of migration, mobility, and crises has led to a discernible focus on international migration, narrowly defined as the act of crossing national borders with the intention of establishing long-term residence. Scholarship on crisis migration, the politicization of migration, or its framing as a crisis have accordingly focused on how international mobility is triggered and perceived in relation to critical developments, especially at the national and international scales. This focused body of literature has undoubtedly yielded valuable insights into comprehending how crises influence migration practices, discourses concerning migration, and political responses to it, as well as the construction of migration as a crisis in itself.

However, Lindley (2014: 1) points out that constructing human mobility as a (cause of) crisis corresponds to a more general “deep well of sedentarist thinking, which in some sense frames migration as crisis, and staying put as the natural and desirable human condition.” This orientation becomes particularly apparent in relation to forced migration movements following

political crises (Oesch, 2014). The literature on transnational and circular movements of refugees has examined how “in contrast to the migratory strategies developed by the refugees, the three solutions to the problem of the refugees promoted by the UNHCR (voluntary repatriation in the country of origin; integration in the host country; resettlement in a third country) are based on the idea that solutions are found when movements stop” (Monsutti, 2008: 58).

Crises and the Migration-Mobility Nexus: A Reflexive and Encompassing Approach

The sedentarist bias and the focus on longer-term migration between nation-states underscore the lingering influence of methodological nationalism within the field (Dahinden, 2016; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) wherein the broader spectrum of human mobility dynamics in times of crises remains insufficiently explored and conceptualized. Our argument herein contends that a more expansive exploration of mobility perspectives (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Zufferey et al., 2021) is useful to fully understand the intricate relationship between human movement and events and conditions perceived as crises.

Notably, there is also a need to better understand the relationship between crises and immobility (Lindley, 2014; Martin & Bergmann, 2021) in the context of various crises. This has become even more obvious with the mobility restrictions issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Piccoli et al., 2021; Piccoli et al., 2023) and the differential impact they had on different groups of (im)mobile and (im)mobilized people (Martin & Bergmann, 2021; Xiang et al., 2023).

In this paper, we aim to go beyond the existing approaches to the interplay between crises, migration, and mobility, which we believe are still too narrow. Accordingly, we embrace an encompassing understanding of crises as either particular events or structural conditions with rather “extensive and large-scale changes and effects” (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022: 5) and adopt what Bösch et al. (2020: 5) call a reflexive perspective “in which the constructivist dimension remains acknowledged” without relativizing a more objectivist view of “the real causes and effects” of the crises under investigation.

Our approach builds on the concept of the Migration-Mobility Nexus (see Piccoli et al., 2024) and its interplays (continuum, enablement, opposition, and hierarchy) to study the crisis-induced shifts between migration, mobility, and immobility. To understand the complex and potentially intertwined way in which crises interact with the Migration-Mobility Nexus, we propose to combine a multilevel analysis of experiences, practices and agency, of perceptions and attitudes, and of governance.

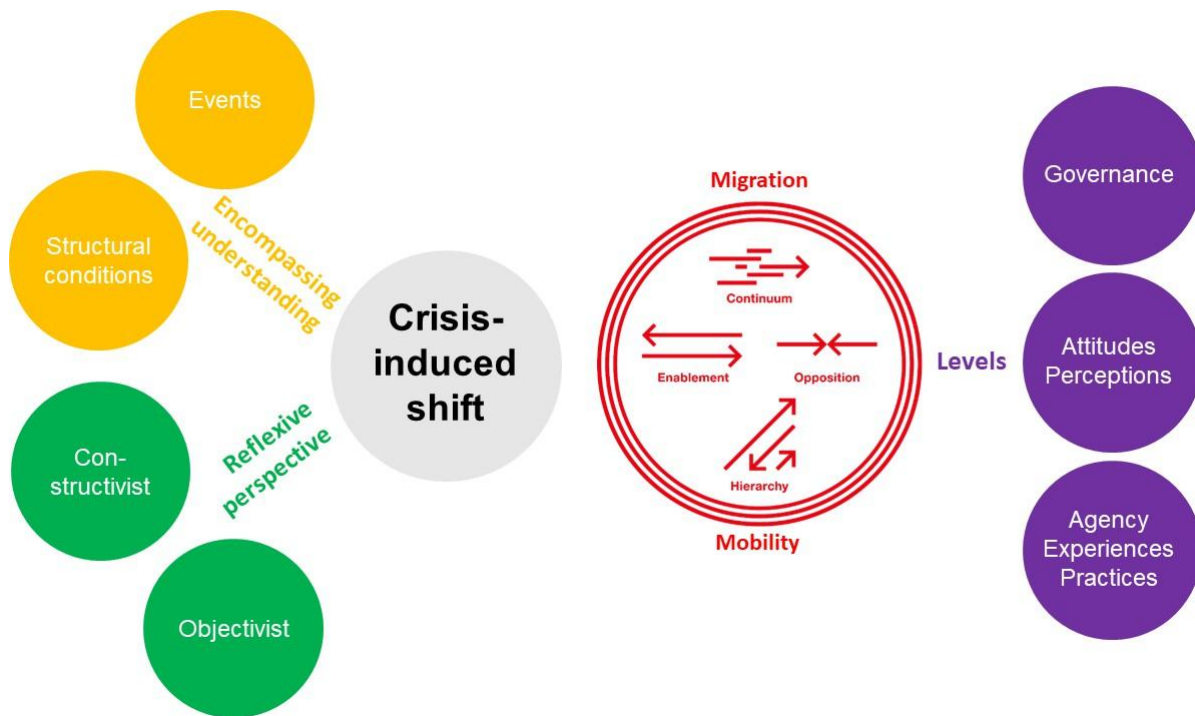


Figure 1: A reflexive and multilevel approach to crises, migration and (im)mobility

The Migration-Mobility Nexus

The Migration-Mobility Nexus (MMN) invites researchers to question how and why migration and mobility are bound together and what consequences this entails (Bitschnau & D’Amato, 2023; Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2020; Piccoli et al., 2024; Steiner & Wanner, 2019). While the MMN does not provide strict definitions of “migration” and “mobility,” it recognizes that the two terms refer to two closely related yet distinct concepts that have been treated separately in the academic literature, each with its own unique focus and approach.

Migration typically refers to the permanent or semipermanent movement of individuals or groups from one place to another that occurs within the context and under the conditions of the nation-state order. Migration studies have traditionally concentrated on understanding the reasons behind people's decisions to relocate from one national jurisdiction to another, the social and economic impacts on both sending and receiving societies, and the legal and policy frameworks governing migration. In contrast, mobility encompasses a wider range of movement. First, it extends beyond human mobility, with considerable scholarship dedicated to examining the movement of goods, capital, and technologies. It also transcends spatial dimensions, as the concept inherently carries a stratified aspect, such as “social mobility.” Finally, mobility is not just about permanent movement, as it also includes temporary or cyclical

movement, and it is not limited to movements between nation-states – “internal mobility” is a relevant consideration as well. When mobility studies investigate human movement, they focus on its dynamic nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of different forms of mobility, including commuting, tourism, daily travel, and virtual mobility through digital technologies.

While research has traditionally studied migration and mobility as separate subjects, the Migration- Mobility Nexus postulates that we cannot fully understand one without considering the other. Treating some people as migrants and others as mobile individuals can produce complementarities, dualities, contradictions, and/or tensions. The focus on such dynamics, on their analysis and explanation, contributes to a better understanding of human movement and its political, social, economic, legal, and moral implications.

Against this background, the Migration-Mobility Nexus (nccr – on the move, 2019; Piccoli et al., 2024) outlines four possible ways in which the interplay between migration and mobility can manifest itself: 1) enablement, where migration might enable mobility, or the other way around; 2) continuum, which stretches between the poles of “migration” conceptualized as long-term and permanent forms of movement and “mobility” as more temporary and fluid forms of movement; 3) hierarchy, where migration and mobility are political categories that are used to determine or legitimize hierarchies of movements; and 4) opposition, where migration and mobility represent exclusive conceptions of movement.

The MMN thus allows us to discern and analyze these crisis-induced shifts within migration and mobility hierarchies, providing a framework that accommodates the complexity of human movement during times of upheaval, and to consider both mobility and immobility. For instance, the sudden eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent travel restrictions highlighted how established hierarchies of human movement were reshaped. Paradoxically, this crisis immobilized traditionally highly mobile groups like tourists, while facilitating the movement of “essential” workers who were now deemed pivotal to upholding societal functioning. It is also helpful to distinguish between systemic and system-endemic crises: while systemic crises are driven by factors external to the entity being researched, like pandemics, system-endemic crises arise from failures within that given entity, for example collapsing national regimes.

Understanding the Practice, Perception, and Governance of Migration and (Im)Mobility in Times of Crisis

Crises, their characteristics, and their experience and management are complex and potentially overlap. They are dealt with differently at different levels of society (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022) and the changes they entail can be seen as structural, group-related, or individual. The

following subsections outline how the interaction between critical events and/or conditions and the Migration-Mobility Nexus can enable a comprehensive understanding of the manifold impacts of systemic and system-endemic crises on migration, mobility, and immobility dynamics. First, we delve deeper into the concepts of agency, experiences, and practices; next, we investigate attitudes and perceptions and, finally, governance.

Agency, Experiences, and Practices

The impact of a given (economic, environmental, political, and/or public health) crisis largely depends on both mobile and immobile people's roles, positions, resources, and personal situations (Rydstrom, 2022; Zittoun, 2007). Three basic concepts are pivotal to our approach: experiences, agency, and practices. Employing a bottom-up sociocultural perspective enables a deeper understanding of how individuals deal with crisis and how crisis interacts with the Migration- Mobility Nexus at a given time and in a specific location. Such a perspective also facilitates the understanding of the interplay between crises, the Migration-Mobility Nexus and broader structures of social and political organization.

Based on the work of Faizullaev (2007: 532) on individuals' experiences of states, we conceptualize individuals' experiences as "direct, observational knowledge of the world" and as the conscious perception of reality in everyday life. The state can also be experienced by individuals that may perceive it as a holistic, intentional entity with its own interests, emotions, and power.

Methodologically, first-hand accounts offer an authentic and intimate lens that provides a view of how people experience and make sense of different crises and their concrete manifestation in everyday life (Muller Mirza & Dos Santos, 2019; Zittoun et al., 2008). The study of people's diaries in particular can be used as a way to access lived experiences (Bernal Marcos et al., 2023). Combining this with a life-course perspective offers another pathway to studying the accumulation of crises and their impact on people's lives (Gray & Dagg, 2019).

Agency is defined as the capacity of individuals, including the most vulnerable, to act, to make decisions, and to influence outcomes within their environments. It is therefore seen as a conversion process (Bazzani, 2023). While agency is inherent in every actor, it also develops relationally in exchange with other actors and is influenced by particular contexts, in particular if these are shaped by critical developments.

Empirically, agency can, for instance, be examined in interactions between forced migrants and solidarity activists in the context of so-called refugee crises following the wars in Syria and Ukraine. Both groups of actors interact and deal with liminal situations (Hartonen et al., 2022), in particular with regard to their mobility and immobility practices (both cross-border

and internally) but also regarding other challenges of everyday life, such as dealing with legal or health problems, searching for accommodation and work, and accessing different types of care. Studying how crises and liminal situations are experienced and narrated by those most affected by these crises provides an insight into the process of how they mobilize agency on a personal level. By referring to the concept of enablement of the MMN, we can claim that migration caused by crisis may lead to (im)mobility and that forced migrants make use of agentic resources to become or remain mobile.

Last but not least, we define practices as the routines and behaviors of persons, groups, or institutions, especially within crisis contexts (Reckwitz, 2002). These can range from mobility patterns to everyday interactions such as seeking accommodation or work. Practices can influence and be influenced by larger structures, for example government policies. Significantly, practices are adaptive and can evolve in response to crises, often integrating technological changes.

Individuals' practices can be investigated within the context of various crises, for instance the global COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturns such as the Euro crisis. Researchers with a more qualitative focus may explore how specific practices change, for example regarding the use of technology such as traceability applications as a response to crisis and its governance (Power, 2019), and how mobility governance is shaped by a socio-technical transition. In this context, traceability encompasses not only international flights between countries but also everyday mobility activities involving various modes of transportation. We can observe the continuum of these mobilities within the framework of MMN. Employing quantitative methodology, on the other hand, offers a holistic perspective on multiple cases of mobility, health outcomes, and labor market results at both national and international scales. Taking into account various factors such as skills, gender, and migration status, it also allows, in the same vein as a qualitative approach, an emphasis on the differentiated impact of crises on individuals' (im)mobility practices and related hierarchies of human movements in the nexus between migration and mobility. In this context, migration has an impact on enabling mobility, as indicated in the MMN. This perspective recognizes the multidimensional nature of individuals' experiences during crises, which in turn influences agency. Ongoing research, for instance, indicates that the COVID-19 crisis affected the residential behavior of foreigners, possibly accompanied by changes in migration strategies, for example in terms of their decision to leave a particular place or stay, to move or not to move.

Against the background of these conceptual approaches to experiences, agency, and practices, a crisis can be studied from two angles: as an event or condition (from an objectivist

view, which sees a crisis as a context or incident) or as a construction (from a constructivist viewpoint, that is, understanding how a situation or process is problematized and perceived as a crisis) (Brubaker, 2013). The “reflexive” understanding of crises that integrates both angles shows at the micro level how critical situations are “made” through people’s experiences and responses but at the same time how they are “facts” manifesting themselves in the practices of different actors, some of which have an impact on the meso or macro level (e.g., societal discourses, governance tools, or regimes), and how they influence each other.

At the same time, there is a tension between systemic and system-endemic crises and their interaction with the relation between what is treated as mobility and what is labeled as migration, which might arise from their external and internal origins, respectively. Systemic crises, driven by external factors like pandemics, can lead to forced mobility or immobility practices, disrupting established patterns (Duque-Calvache et al., 2021; Tønnessen, 2021). System-endemic crises, arising from internal failures, might result in immobility or controlled mobility practices due to economic or political constraints (Lefkofridi & Schmitter, 2021; Tilly, 2011; van Mol, 2016). The agency of migrants interacts with these dynamics as they navigate challenges posed by each crisis type. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic (a systemic crisis), forced immobility occurred due to global health concerns, while during the Euro crisis (a system-endemic crisis), controlled mobility was seen due to economic instability.

Our approach allows us to acknowledge that systemic crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have universal and long-lasting consequences that affect how individuals globally navigate the nexus between migration and mobility through their experiences and practices and through the agency they mobilize by engaging in this navigation. Simultaneously, it provides a basis for delving into system-endemic crises, like the Euro crisis, in which internal factors triggered economic downturns that intricately interacted with migration and immobility dynamics in people’s everyday lives. Within these crises, then, it is possible to spotlight the diverse experiences of mobile or immobile populations that are shaped by their unique attributes and circumstances and influenced by their agency to navigate challenges posed by crises. This underscores the effect of the intricate interplay of systemic and system-endemic factors on migration patterns and (im)mobility practices, thereby enriching our understanding of how individuals adapt and respond in complex crisis contexts to the dynamics we look at through the lens of the Migration-Mobility Nexus.

Beyond this, as elaborated in more detail in section 3.2.3, the concept of “regimes of mobility and immobility” can be combined with our previously outlined interest in experiences,

agency, and practices to link the dynamics just sketched out to societally impactful attitudes and perceptions (3.2.2) and to governance aspects (3.2.3).

Perceptions and Attitudes and Their Effects

Experiences and practices of crises, migration, and (im)mobility discussed in the last section have to be understood against the context of related perceptions and attitudes of larger social groups (e.g., majority populations) or impactful institutional or political actors (e.g., media or nongovernmental organizations/civil society) in a given public sphere or society. This subsection first conceptualizes the terms “attitudes” and “perceptions” as useful tools for analyzing these actors’ dynamics regarding crises and migration, then discusses how diverse larger social groups may shape how crises are perceived and evaluated and, lastly, outlines examples of contemporary research on societally and politically impactful perceptions and attitudes.

Perceptions and attitudes are similar yet distinct concepts. For the definition of the term attitudes, we follow social psychology and the study of human relations for which it is an “indispensable concept,” classically conceptualized as “a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, [and] exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s [or community’s] response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (Allport, 1935: 810). Importantly, attitudes are necessarily evaluative, either positively or negatively valenced, and are known to have emotional, cognitive, and conative (i.e., intention of action) dimensions (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). This description is similar to the description of perception in as much as both attitudes and perceptions comprise forms of (individual or collective) “thinking,” but attitudes have an evaluative component that perception may or may not have. We refer to perceptions here as sense-making and as being used to understand a situation or social context, while attitudes necessarily reflect evaluations of the same situation or social context (or group, actor, or any other attitudinal object).

When we look at perceptions and approaches to crises in this section, we focus on larger social groups and actors that function as intermediaries in social or political systems, such as international organizations or media platforms. Intermediaries that typically appear path dependent and stable might decide to change their attitudes when dealing with these perceived points of critical junctures (Soifer, 2012). Indeed, when (alleged) disruptions occur and are dealt with, new perceptions and attitudes play a role and become mainstream and institutionalized as part of the organization going forward (Kreuder-Sonnen & Tantow, 2023). According to sociological institutionalists, international organizations can also be viewed as intermediaries with self-preservation interests that want to expand their responsibilities, power, and influence.

Their ability to take on new tasks in times of perceived critical junctures depends on their ability to define problems and solutions in ways that require the expansion of their responsibilities (Kreuder-Sonnen & Tantow, 2023). For them, crises can thus, at times, serve as opportunities to redefine perceptions, attitudes, and solutions through novel mandates and the expansion of their activities, which can ensure their future relevance and reinforce their intermediary role in how crises are governed and dealt with by individuals.

When investigating the role of intermediaries, actors such as media platforms appear to be particularly important. Communication between political actors and the public through the action of intermediaries has an impact on perceptions of crises and their role with regard to (im)mobility.

Media platforms, for example, have been analyzed as platforms on which reality is presented in specific ways that make these perceptions seem sensible, rational, and reasonable to the public (Boswell et al., 2020). Their role in shaping perceptions and attitudes has largely been investigated with a focus on communication and narratives around specific issues and their impact on the perceptions and attitudes of the public (Bitschnau et al., 2021; Buonfino, 2004; Grande et al., 2019). It is through communication platforms and tools that specific representations of reality are spread to a greater or lesser extent. Given this, migration and (im)mobility scholarship, which is specifically interested in discourse and communication tools, has recently elaborated on representation in the media as a significant contribution to the creation of discourses around migration and (im)mobility that are widely socially shared (Bello, 2022; Valente et al., 2023).

The perceptions and attitudes of these powerful actors influence the creation and development of the public's perspectives and attitudes. Referring for a moment to the Migration-Mobility Nexus (Piccoli et al., 2024), for example, these perceptions and attitudes may play a role in the “opposition” interplay between migration and mobility: movements of people might be perceived as either migration (long-term, permanent) or mobility (temporary and fluid). Furthermore, people on the move might constitute flows that are positioned in different hierarchical positions depending on how perceptions and attitudes towards these specific movements have been created and nurtured.

While contemporary research is increasingly analyzing how diverse actors in the public sphere may shape perceptions and understandings of crises in relation to migration and (im)mobility, as outlined above, scholars have also, as already mentioned, investigated crises as objectifiable events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, economic crises).

Researchers who are currently considering attitudes and practices that developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are examining, for example, how this crisis has impacted internal and external (im)mobility and related attitudes, health indicators, dynamics on the labor market (e.g., actions of recruiters), employment, earnings, and inequality in the medium term (Baert et al., 2015; Borjas & Cassidy, 2020). Ongoing evidence has already suggested that the COVID-19 crisis has altered mobility-related attitudes (i.e., border closure preferences) among national populations.

When the consequences of the war in Ukraine are considered in current research, there is an examination of how identity dynamics and associated affects shape the way national majorities in various host countries show solidarity with (Ukrainian) forced migrants, as well as how Ukrainians who have remained in Ukraine show solidarity with (other) internally displaced peoples in the context of the war. Recent evidence has already suggested that identifying with Europe, for example, increases solidarity with Ukrainian forced migrants among nationals in western European countries, above and beyond prosocial dispositions (Politi et al., 2023). This coincides with existing research on the mobilization of solidarity initiatives, also sometimes referred to as mass emergency behavior (Drury, 2018), in the context of various crises (Cassar et al., 2017; Chantarat et al., 2019; Rao et al., 2011).

Ongoing research is also examining how the application of (new) policies following the onset of the war in Ukraine have led to better hiring opportunities for Ukrainians compared to other immigrant groups, and whether the arrival of Ukrainian forced migrants (in Switzerland, for example) has exacerbated hiring-related discrimination against other immigrant groups. This example illustrates the double standards that can also ensue when reactions to a crisis mean prioritizing one group (which is in a situation of need) over other groups (which may have already been, and still are, in situations of need; Krings et al., 2021). This example illustrates quite clearly a hierarchy, in reference to the MMN interplay, which points to how certain individuals' movements are viewed as more legitimate than others', resulting in the hierarchical categorization of various forms of movement.

Other research has investigated how economic crises affect wages and, consequently, perceptions of and attitudes towards specific kinds of movement. During the rather recent Euro crisis, for example, the sharp appreciation of the Swiss franc entailed an important real wage increase for cross-border workers but not for resident workers. Consequently, as ongoing research shows, this might have sparked the belief in Switzerland that migrants should earn 10% less and cross-border workers 20% less than native workers. These findings illuminate our understanding of the conflicts that arose in the wake of this crisis in firms employing both

residential and cross-border workers. They also add a layer of complexity to our conventional understanding of the hierarchy between mobility – typically evaluated positively – and migration – typically evaluated negatively – by illustrating a situation in which mobility is perceived as less valuable than migration.

Still concerning the labor market in Switzerland but in the context of (historical) economic downturn and recovery (e.g., in the 1990s), ongoing research is investigating the actions of employers following the restriction of the seasonal permit to EU countries in 1991 and the abolition of that permit in 2002, as well as how seasonal workers reacted to longer-term residence permits in the context of these changes. It is based on existing research interested in the impact of legal status regulation on wages (Naidu et al., 2016).

Systemic processes, such as longer-term political or environmental crises (e.g., democratic backsliding, climate change), also often result in disproportionately negative effects for groups which are already experiencing pervasive disadvantage, like Indigenous peoples (González et al., 2022) or other minority groups (Bağcı, 2023), and may therefore even look systemic despite the fact that they can also be construed as a collection of isolated, objectifiable (and perhaps intensifying) events. These processes again speak to the hierarchical interplay in the MMN framework by depicting how such crises have tended to exacerbate and deepen existing hierarchies between groups, further entrenching inequality. Ongoing research is investigating how such crises (differentially) affect the expression of the political voice of Indigenous peoples in Chile and New Zealand (Gale et al., 2025), as well as their appraisals of events and their attitudes and behaviors towards newcomers/immigrants. Further research investigating the erosion of democratic norms (see e.g., Castells, 2018; Krishnarajan, 2023) in the context of immigration and ethno-racial diversity in the Global North (the US, Switzerland, and Belgium) and the Global South (Turkey and South Africa) identifies varying conceptions of the demos, also known as the imagined political community (Anderson, 1991), as a missing piece in discussions around the erosion of these democratic norms.

Governance in and through Crises

As previously outlined, crises can be considered as episodes when social organization is re-ordered because policy actors reconsider attitudes and approaches that no longer seem to work in a situation where the future does not seem predictable. To grasp these impacts, we elaborate in this last section on the governance of crises and its impact on the nexus between migration and mobility, in particular when it comes to the hierarchization of human movements.

Governance can refer to how a specific moment or the longer-term conditions of crises are managed and dealt with by different actors and institutions. This focus can demonstrate how

such moments reveal structures of power and inequality, thus making them more visible, which means it is easier to study them. In this section, we put forward a distinction between governance of crises and governance through crises. If we take both of these types of governance together, we can approach in a nuanced way the systems, processes, and structures that are in place and that govern migration and mobility and the concurrent interplay with crises.

Starting with governance of crises and human movements, it is important to recognize that governance of crises can manifest itself in many different forms. It comprises practices that immediately react to a crisis, devise possible responses to a crisis, and guide the behavior of others affected by the crisis. For instance, the emergency measures put in place when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, including border closures, national lockdowns, and transnational repatriation operations (Chu et al., 2020). Governance of crises also involves the production of knowledge informing different responses and framings of what should be seen as the main problem to be solved. Staying with the example of COVID-19, we have seen a massive expansion of research investigating how human mobilities affected the reproduction rates of the virus, directly impacting public health policies that shaped the ways we moved through places (Klauser, 2023).

The COVID-19 crisis-initiated changes in the governance of migration and mobility, which partly inverted the hierarchical interplay between both phenomena. Traditionally highly mobile groups, such as highly skilled professionals and business elites, were forced to stay put, while the movements of particular workers from systemically relevant professions were facilitated.

Conversely, the sanitizing logics at the center of public health policies shaped the governance of the EU's borders, which Tazzioli and Stierl (2021: 539) argue were "exploited to enact deterrence" against migrants as "corona spreaders" at the southern borders of Italy, Malta, and Greece.

At the same time, governance involves a variety of actors involved in complex policy domains involving human migration and mobility. The diversity of actors participating in the governing of crisis again highlights the intricate links between the different levels of social and political organization and organizational scales. They can include state and nonstate actors alike, such as international organizations that coordinate crisis responses (see previous section), national governments, local authorities, corporate actors, private organizations, and nongovernmental organizations supporting individuals affected by the economic fallout of a crisis (Geddes, 2022; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022; Triandafyllidou, 2022). The diversity of actors is also related to the dynamics within organizations or groups of organizations, which are

not necessarily aligned but also work through negotiations and hierarchies. In this vein, we might also imagine crises of governance, which refer to these inner tensions that manifest in political crises, conflicts, and controversies within states and political regimes. Crises can present an opportunity for states to assert a “renationalisation narrative” that reconstitutes the fragmented governance landscape with the promise that the national state can re-establish control and solve the “crisis” (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022: 1). Sahin-Mencutek et al. (2022) link this with rising populist rhetoric within governments, particularly where migration is framed as a scapegoating mechanism for other societal problems.

Crises can also open up cleavages in the governance of movement, in the sense that they present opportunities for individual actors, groups of actors, or organizations, and for a redistribution of power through the assertion of other voices, prioritizing different forms of expertise and forming new connections and collaborations. If a crisis is defined by the departure from a stable path, it is a moment when conventional modes of governing are no longer applicable and new procedures and solutions must be invented instead (Snow et al., 2007). This redistribution of power can have more just outcomes for people on the move, for example through the empowerment of grassroots organizations, civil society organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (Cuttitta et al., 2023). In such a moment of crisis, different actors compete with alternative solutions and narratives that explain the source of the situation, its nature, and ostensibly the best solution to the situation. Put differently, the governance of crisis is a highly contested endeavor and shapes and reshapes power relations.

In this situation, actors and organizations have incentives relating to self-preservation: they want to stay relevant despite a changing context. At the same time, actors and organizations may seek new responsibilities and gain more prominence via those new responsibilities in the form of the governance of a policy domain. In the field of human migration and mobility, for instance, the pandemic brought forward opportunities for novel policy choices that had long been advocated by human rights groups, including the regularization of migration status in countries such as Portugal (Mazzilli, 2022). Given the opportunity delivered by the crisis to reframe the “problem” of irregular migration as an issue of accessing healthcare, the governance of migration was in many ways redrawn, at least in the short term. These regularization processes speak to the hierarchical interplay in the MMN framework, as the political response to the COVID-19 crisis could potentially have transformed established hierarchies of human movement by integrating marginalized categories of migrants into the mechanisms of the welfare state.

The productivity of power also comes to the fore in the perspective of governance through crises. In this case, a crisis itself is of less interest, and the focus lies on how moments of disruption reveal and work through existing power structures and how individuals and organizations shape and are shaped by these (Kjaer, 2023). Here we can discern two research streams. In the first stream, the focus can be on the action of governance: the shaping of and being shaped by power and how individuals and organizations navigate policy spaces. In the second stream, on the other hand, the focus can be on the construction of an event as a crisis and on the narratives, labels, and categories employed in such a situation.

Regarding the actions and practices of governance, it is important to recognize that crises and the way crises are governed have implications for individual lives. Narratives, practices, and government are entangled to create specific consequences for different actors – even actors who are not directly involved in the governance of a crisis. To understand the interconnections between narratives, practices, and government, the concept of regimes can help illuminate specific constellations and can be used to study how they affect different actors. In this perspective, the interaction between different individuals, between different institutions, and between individuals and institutions is of central interest. Crises can reveal existing power relations and complexities and can highlight how there is always a political dimension to governance. “Regimes of (im)mobility” are defined as the intricate and disputed interactions that take place among diverse actors, practices, rules, and technologies that govern and mold how mobility and immobility occur and are perceived. The concept of regimes, although transdisciplinary and broadly applied, might refer to a national or regional regime of migration governance. But regimes might also refer to conceptual regimes, for example, a socio-technical regime or a race regime that are working broadly towards the aim of holistically capturing how complex systems contribute and (re)produce the governance of social phenomena (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). A crisis may, for instance, be the instigator of new forms of digitalization as a way to govern populations, but this may also invite everyday users to change their practices regarding the use of certain technologies as a response to crisis. As we have already discussed, the evolving use of technology illustrates how governance of crisis can provide opportunities that redistribute power within the regime (Geels, 2002).

Scholars who focus on the act of constructing an event as a crisis have also turned to the processes involved in this construction: the narratives, categorizations, and labels involved in describing an event as a crisis (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). Historical legacies from previous crises and power struggles influence how subsequent crises are negotiated and constructed (e.g., Dzenovska, 2020; Klotz, 2024; Yan, 2023). In this perspective, the interplay between different

actors and between different spheres of knowledge and narratives is examined to understand, for instance, why certain kinds of human migration or mobility are constructed as problematic and not others. The actions of individuals matter, including individuals in organizations acting in an official function, such as bureaucrats.

Despite the different foci, what unites governance of crises and governance through crisis is that there is an understanding that a crisis is limited in time and will therefore end. The end of a crisis is defined by newfound stability and path dependency, but it is important to acknowledge that this stability may only exist on the surface and that a new crisis can reveal underlying tensions that become legacies in subsequent crises.

Conclusion

In this paper, we elaborated on ways in which crises are conceptualized and analyzed in contemporary research and in relation to migration, mobility, and immobility in particular. We argued that a more comprehensive consideration of mobility (and immobility) perspectives can help overcome the limitations of methodological nationalism and grasp the multifaceted relationship between human movement and crises. Following existing attempts to develop broad and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding crises, we presented a broad and reflexive framework that is related to the Migration-Mobility Nexus to study the impact of crises (Piccoli et al., 2024).

We outlined different ways to investigate the impact of crises by reflecting on how people deal with crises in everyday life and how perceptions and attitudes interact with and shape agency and practices, and elaborated different ways of approaching conceptually how crises, migration, and (im)mobility are governed.

Individuals' experiences offer a lens through which we can view how individuals navigate the challenges they face. Agency underscores the inherent capacity of even the most vulnerable person to influence their journeys and the lived realities they encounter. Concurrently, practices, both static and adaptive, mirror real-world behaviors, illuminating the dynamic interplay between individual choices and larger social structures. At the same time, the examination of the perceptions and attitudes of larger social groups of a given society (e.g., majority populations) or of impactful intermediaries (e.g., media, international organizations, or recruiters) discloses insights into how crises are dealt with and impact various migration- and (im)mobility-related dynamics at play in societies and public spheres. We also highlighted how combining different understandings of governance in and through crisis helps analyze in a nuanced way the systems, processes, and structures that are in place to control institutions and societies and migration and mobility in crisis contexts.

While the approach we have presented allows for a more multifaceted understanding of the interplays between crises and the Migration-Mobility Nexus, its potential to expand the broadly Euro-American centered perspective of research in the field remains to be further explored, especially in close collaboration with scholars from the Global South (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2023). By bringing together emic, reflexive, and more objectivist research angles, our argument may inform the empirical investigation of varied critical situations and longer-term constellations in a way that allows a broadening of existing stances. By unveiling and questioning the differential understanding, impact, and perception of crises and human (im)mobility at different levels of social organization, the presented approach contributes to the ongoing project of going beyond essentialist limitations in social science research, in particular with regard to sedentarist and methodologically nationalist biases but also with regard to postcolonial continuities in knowledge production. At the same time, a concise and yet comprehensive and empirically grounded theorization of crises and their manifold consequences undoubtedly remains a challenge that requires further interdisciplinary conceptual thinking and research. We hope that our attempt at formulating a reflexive and multilevel approach provides a fruitful and thought-provoking impetus for future work in this direction.

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Conceptual Article II

Crises as Claims

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Abstract

From risk society to contentious politics or liquid modernity, crises lie at the core of much of the social sciences. Yet, there is surprising vagueness around the term, making it difficult to compare studies, or to respond effectively to disruptive events. Here, we seek to clarify the concept of crisis to make it more useful for empirical research in the social sciences and humanities. We present a theoretical framework in which crises are defined as claims. An actor makes a claim that a situation differs from what should be, and that the consequences of this are grave/negative. Crises thus have a normative side, implying that urgent action is needed to ensure that the situation does not get worse. An audience is required for a crisis to arise. We provide examples to show that this approach can be applied to many situations and argue that it allows for a more disciplined study of crises and their effects on social phenomena, bridging objectivist and constructivist approaches. In particular, the theoretical framework is suitable for studying the diffusion of references to crises.

Keywords

Crisis, theoretical frame, claims, normalcy

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Introduction

The concept of crisis has become a staple of social sciences, as is evident when looking through calls for papers and conference themes: as social scientists, we seem to see crises in democracy, health, climate, migration, or governance, to name just a few examples. Indeed, crises are at the core of many explanations of social change such as risk society (Beck, 2009), contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). However, it is not only social scientists who talk about crises: formal politics and social movements also frequently refer to crises in their debates and calls for action. While the many references to crises in the

literature and news mean that their nature and influence are constantly reflected on, there is no consensus as to how to analytically conceptualize or define crises in social science research, making it difficult to compare studies (Koselleck & Richter, 2006; Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022), and with that to respond effectively to disruptive events.

Broadly speaking, existing approaches can be classified into approaches that regard crises as moments of change and those who see crises as an ‘illness’ to overcome, and between objective and subjective understandings of crises. Here, we propose an approach that bridges objectivist and constructivist approaches and ontological perspectives to crises and connects existing interpretations of crises as structural or exceptional by arguing that crises should be understood as claims. This approach does not disregard the positivist ontology that [disruptive] facts exist in the world and that information is verifiable, while it acknowledges that narratives around a specific disruptive event play a role in the development of the disruptive event’s understanding and perception as crisis and the consequent crisis management. As such it builds on and synthesizes work from different disciplines.

Through this framework, we seek to clarify the concept and its analytical use. We provide conceptual clarity and apply the perspective of “crises as claims” to examples while demonstrating how existing accounts of crises are compatible with our frame, although we do not trace crisis claims in detail for reasons of space. We argue that bridging different perspectives on the concept helps not only at the level of definition, but also in the analysis of responses to crises and alleged processes of reinstating normalcy. A clearer definition of crises is a vital first step to reflect on what it is considered as normalcy in different contexts: context has been often overlooked in the conceptualization of crisis while being a crucial part in the process of defining a disruptive event as crisis or not.

Existing approaches

The lack of consensus about what a crisis is may reflect the complexity of the concept and its etymology. The term can be traced to the ancient Greek verb κρίνω, which depending on the context, means separate, choose, judge or decide. Consequently, we can understand crises as moments of judgment, decision, or disruption: the moment something is determined, decided, or judged (Koselleck & Richter 2006; Roitman 2013). There is an implicit temporality, with a period before the crisis, the potential judgment or decision, and the period after the decision. This focus on change is present when a crisis is described as “a pivotal moment or turning point – an emergency situation” (McAdam, 2014: 11). However, there is also a ‘medical’ conceptualization of crises, where periods of illness are understood as temporary episodes. Taking this perspective, the situation before the crisis can be restored through healing and

recovery, although an illness can lead to lasting damage (Koselleck & Richter 2006). What unites these perspectives is a view of crises as clearly bounded, and a deterministic path towards death if no healing or change can be achieved.

The understanding of crises as pivotal moments is common in studies on decision-making, policy development, and the role of different actors in handling crises. Hermann (1969) provided one of the earliest systematic definitions: a crisis (1) threatens high priority values of an organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization. This conceptualization emphasizes the urgency of crises, and how the threat to high-priority values plays a crucial role in defining an event as disruptive. The centrality of values opens up the possibility that crises are contested because the values that are referenced may be recognized by some and not by others in organizations or communities. Building on this, Rosenthal, Charles and 't Hart (1989) conceptualized crises as perceived threats requiring urgent decisions under conditions of deep uncertainty, a definition widely adopted in crisis management research. Our framework aligns with these classic definitions in recognizing the centrality of threat and urgency but shifts the analytical focus from decision makers' perceptions to the broader claim making process through which situations become publicly defined as crises.

The existing literature can also be divided into objectivist and constructivist approaches. In objectivist approaches, crises are defined as objectifiable events — situations that can be identified based on objective criteria — or systemic crises related to a specific social system. Studies that apply an objectivist approach are mainly concerned with the investigation of crisis management, described as the process through which specific actors get together through multi-organizational arrangements to solve problems which are complex and cannot be solved by single actors (Nohrstedt et al. 2018; Scott & Nowell 2020). This approach of crisis management looks at the response to crises, but it does not interrogate the need for a shared understanding of the problem or crisis for the management approach to work. In constructivist approaches, crises are events that are shaped, constructed and understood in diverse ways by societies and societal actors; they are defined by how they accumulate meaning through time and space. These accounts analyze crises as a social construct and focus on the “construction of knowledge and the resulting assignment of meaning” rather than objectively verifiable facts (Spector 2022: 1). If we take the objectivist logic to its extreme, crises exist independently of being observed, while in the constructivist logic, an active construction by actors may be possible without an underlying event, simply conjuring and instrumentalizing a crisis (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2022; Masco 2017). These approaches do not share the ontological perspective on crises: an

objectivist approach accepts a crisis as observable and follows an implicit positivist ontological perspective on crises as “facts, truths, relationships [that simply] exist in the world” (Hinchey, 2010: 36–37 as cited in Spector 2022: 3). On the other hand, a constructivist approach is rooted in the ontological perspective that “an objective, uncontested understanding of the world does not and cannot exist” (Spector 2022).

Within these broad approaches, scholars have used different nuances on the concept of crisis (see also Cohen 2018, Pierson 2004, Alexander 2019). Research following a structural approach understands crises as part of a continuity of everyday dynamics (Dobry 2009), highlighting the everyday dimension and normalcy of crises (Fassin 2013; Rydström et al. 2022). Others approach crises as something exceptional, as specific and delimitable events. Whether objectifiable or constructed, crises are seen as specific events that can threaten and potentially drastically change the status quo which is seen as normalcy (McConnell 2020). In this understanding, a crisis is a rupture, a sudden and disruptive event that needs to be addressed with specific action to save or restore normalcy (Koselleck & Richter 2006). As such, crises are often regarded as “critical turning points” which have the potential to change society or governance by both disrupting normalcy and creating opportunities (Amenta et al. 2010; Benford & Snow 2000; Habermas 2001; Koselleck & Richter 2006).

There are existing accounts that describe crises as claims as part of broader investigations of the language and messages used when political actors communicate a crisis (Kalkman 2019; Lyotard 1979; Spector 2019, 2022), literature that is related to work on ‘framing’ more generally, where the active construction of political communication is studied (Baumgartner & Chaqués Bonafont 2026; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Boin et al. 2009). In this literature the focus is on the way a crisis is presented to the other actors and the public, how elements of an event are constructed or framed as urgent at the language level. With a focus on discursive acts, these studies are strong in the recognition of construction and power, but they remain vague about possible diffusion processes and do not present a broader framework. Constructivist accounts avoid normative considerations about whether a position was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ but how the claims reflect the background and interest of the claim-maker (Spector 2022). With that, there is little consideration of the role of evidence in reports about a disruptive event and its characterization as a crisis. Without a broader framework, many studies stop short of asking why some claims to a crisis are successful and why others fail to find resonance – despite comparable discursive acts.

This reflection resonates with existing scholarship (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Emejulu & Bassel, 2017; Strolovitch 2023), showing how the recognition of a crisis is influenced by

power relations: some groups' disruptions are *visibilized* and shared as crises, while crises experienced by marginalized groups remain often unacknowledged. This scholarship, too, would highlight the need to look not only into how crisis claims are made, but also into whose claims are granted legitimacy and visibility. Emejulu & Basel (2017), for example, examine how the 2008 financial crisis was experienced by minority women in France and the United Kingdom, arguing that minority women in these countries already had to navigate everyday crises well before 2008. On a similar point, Strolovich (2023) who argues, based on a mixed-method tracking of the use of the word "crisis" in United States repositories, that it is only when privileged groups are subjects of disruptive events that the term "crisis" is mobilized. They further develop this argument, showing that calling an event a "crisis" operates as an "argument" in its own right: naming a disruptive event a crisis brings together a set of assumptions about, for example, whether the event can be considered a disruption from a normalcy, whether the disruption can be addressed, and about whose responsibility (if any) it is to address the disruption, namely who should act, on whose behalf, and with what expected result. Such studies confirm that although disruptions exist irrespectively of an actor/set of actors claiming a crisis, it is only when they are *visibilized* and amplified that they have the potential to become "crises": this process of *visibilization* is often only successful when people with access to places of power and visibility claim the disruptive event as a crisis. The crucial point expressed in these works is that it is not enough to note that the language of crisis is simply not applied to marginalized groups, rather they bring forward the argument that claiming an event as a crisis marks specific disruptions as solvable and deserving of intervention, at the same time implicitly framing other disruptions (i.e., those affecting marginalized groups) as more of ordinary, expected consequences, outside the scope of what the we – any actor in society, but most times the state – can address. It follows that claiming an event as a crisis does not only define that event in specific but frames other disruptive events that are not considered deserving of the crisis claim and justifies deploying power to solve the disruption – or not. As a result, claiming a crisis plays a central role also in maintaining alive – and at times even deepening – the framing of who counts as marginalized.

Another insightful perspective is the punctuated equilibrium approach (Baumgartner et al. 2009), which highlights how decision-makers may be overwhelmed in moments of crisis because there is too much information and too many options, and thus choose to focus on specific topics to cope with this situation. In this context, crises are an opportunity for some political actors to present changes in such a way that they resonate with others as a way to overcome the crisis (see also Baumgartner and Chaqués Bonafont 2026, or the 'window of

opportunity' argument). Here we are concerned with crises more generally, not restricted to the realm of formal politics and argue that we need to consider a broader set of actors, including an audience that can diffuse, accept, reject, or reformulate a claim. By introducing the relevance of an audience and tracing how a crisis claim can diffuse, we want to give scholars the possibility to consider questions of legitimacy and universality in interpreting disruptive events without denying the objective nature of disruptive facts. In addition, we contend that our framework allows us to reflect on coloniality and consider how crises are interpreted to legitimize certain courses of action. Our intent is reflexive rather than relativist.

In this sense, our approach resonates with studies that examine how actors frame events as urgent or threatening. Securitization theory analyzes how claims about existential threats enable measures of extraordinary nature (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). Work on the politicization of crises (e.g., McConnell, 2020), crisis framing (Benford & Snow, 2000), and attribution of blame (Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986) also highlights how specific actors strategically construct or contest crisis narratives. Our framework incorporates these considerations, but the focus lies more broadly on the process of crisis claim-making and the ways through which claims are spread and consequently accepted or rejected by an audience.

Conceptualizing Crises as Claims

We define crises as *claims*¹, namely a claim that the difference between the 'is' (status quo, facts, or claimed facts) and the 'should' (normative) is unacceptably large and that therefore it is important that we or someone take immediate action (see summary in Figure 1). As a result, a situation, a fact, or the status quo do not simply exist, but the normative aspect of what the situation 'should' be is advanced and developed through a claim. A claim describes a public statement — it may be written, spoken, or communicated in other ways, such as through images — to assert that something is true (Cambridge Dictionary, definition of claim). A crisis claim consists of two sub-claims, one asserting a fact (how the world 'is') and one stating a norm (how the world 'should be'). These sub-claims can be implicit in the sense that they are understood because of the context in which the claim is made, because of whom the actor making the claim is, how the fact is highlighted or presented, or because of implicit references to previous claims by the same or other actors.

¹ We have been inspired by Saward's (2006) conceptualization of representative claims and the terminology he develops. A claim needs an author, referred to as a maker of the claim. This maker (M) claims to represent a specific group in society and, in doing so, puts forward a subject, which could be themselves (S), embodying the group's or constituency's interests, the object (O). The constituency is the observer of this claims-making and develops into the audience who is offered these claims (A). According to this conceptualization, the audience is vital for a legitimate and powerful claim to exist: it is the audience which can accept or reject a representative claim. In order to accept the claim, an audience needs to be convinced of the claim by the maker.

When there is a claim, there is an audience to whom a claim is addressed. It is the audience who accepts a crisis claim that turns an assertion into a narrative where the crisis claim is accepted and shared. Whether an audience accepts a claim depends not only on the persuasiveness of the claim, but also on the legitimacy of the actor making such a claim. Legitimacy can stem from different sources: social legitimacy exists when the claim maker is perceived as having a legitimate voice; formal legitimacy describes a situation when the claim maker has a formal position to make a claim. Our conceptualization of crises contains an aspect of power, where some actors are in a better position to make successful crisis claims than others because of specific forms of legitimacy being at play in the process. We do not aim to investigate the concept of legitimacy in-depth, but we highlight the relevance of different perspectives on legitimacy that should be considered when looking at a process of claims making and propose a structure to more efficiently analyze this process.

The advantage of such a conceptualization is that we can account for central aspects of the nature of crises, their impact on society, and the diffusion of references to crises in public discourse. Starting with the observation of a fact, a description of the world, we include (political) contestation over whether there is a basis for a credible crisis claim. With that, we explicitly include questions of legitimacy that are linked to power and, with that, an audience to whom a claim is made. The focus on the audience makes it clear that to have influence and standing in the public eye, a claim is not only made but it also needs to be recognized as legitimate by at least a part of society. When a claim is accepted — even by a part of society — we have a justification for action. A claim is defined as accepted in societies when we identify an audience for such a claim who supports it. We can identify the following elements as constituents of a crisis claim (see Figure 1):

- An actor (M) who *makes* a claim, whom we refer to as the *maker*. Makers are often political actors in the broader sense, and they may make crisis claims in the name of a group — a claim to representation that may bolster credibility and legitimacy (compare Saward 2006).
- An argument (D) about a situation or fact where the ‘is’ and ‘should’ differ. This argument thus has two components or subclaims: the ‘is’ (D1), and the ‘should’ (D2) which differs from the ‘is’.
- Based on the argument (D), the maker asserts the need for urgent action (U). This assertion is an explicit or implicit call to action caused by the difference between the ‘is’ and the ‘should’ that requires urgent action or intervention because inaction would worsen the

situation. Without this element of urgency, we may look at a (politically) contested issue but not a crisis.

- A claim requires an audience (A) to whom it is offered. The audience may reject a claim to a crisis for different reasons.² The argument D can be rejected because both components (D1, D2) are open to contestation and rejection. For example, the audience may contest whether there was a change in facts (D1) or whether a change is undesirable (D2). The argument D may be accepted, but the claim to urgency (U) may be rejected when the audience does not consider urgent action necessary or possible. What is more, the maker (M) may be considered illegitimate. With that, there is an explicit dimension of power in our conceptualization of claims.

The media – be this mass media or social media – may play an important role in connecting the maker and the audience, providing a platform for some claims and not others (Reese and Shoemaker 2017). While the conceptualization of crises as claims may seem constructivist, we insist on the central role of facts that describe the world and (social) change (D). In this sense, there is an objectivist core: without facts that can be observed, there is no crisis — where a situation objectively does not change for any actor in society, it is difficult to make a credible claim to a crisis in the sense that the audience is unlikely to accept such a claim as legitimate. We acknowledge the possibility of ‘alternative facts’ and fake evidence, but argue that without any observable fact, a crisis claim is unlikely to be successful and accepted by the audience. That said, our argument is entirely compatible with observable claims that are blown out of proportion. Indeed, in an interconnected world, change of some kind is commonplace, opening the possibility to claim a crisis without making things up entirely. We argue that the increasing relevance of the concept of crisis may be rooted in the nature of today’s highly interconnected societies, where facts and change seem to surround us, and consequently the interpretation of those facts and change (cf. Cerny, 1996 on the implications of globalization). As a result, being surrounded by interpretations of facts — and disruptive facts — we are increasingly surrounded by crisis claims. Thus, facts alone are not sufficient for a crisis: they need to be recognized (D) and combined with urgency (U).

² The processes leading to the acceptance or rejection of a crisis claim rely on public information, where individual acceptance of a claim partly depends on the perception of whether their peers do so. This can lead to informational cascades (Bikhchandani et al. 2024; Fowler & Christakis 2010), which means that the acceptance of a crisis claim can change quickly – for example if additional information about the veracity of claims becomes available, think of a neutral ‘fact check’ exposing lies and exaggerations made by politicians. In formal politics, and crisis management, strategic considerations may play a role (Howlett 2023; Boin et al. 2009).

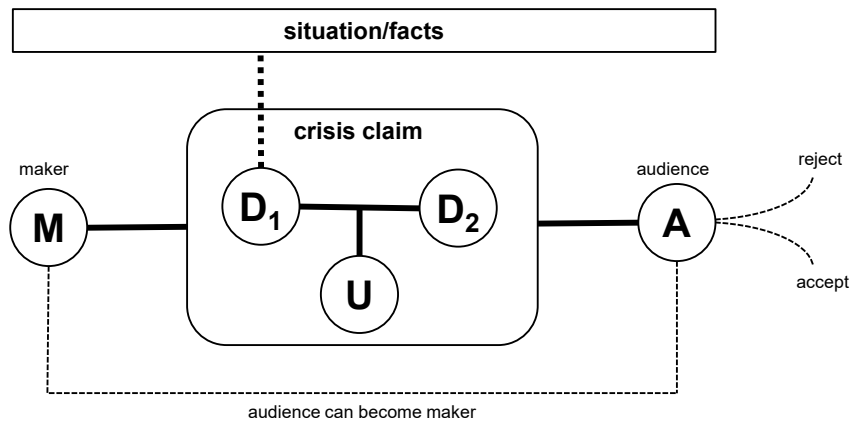


Figure 1 Illustration of the Crisis as Claim framework. A maker (M) makes a crisis claim to an audience (A) which can accept or reject the claim. A crisis claim consists of a description of the world as it 'is' (D1), hence a reference to an objective situation or facts, a description of the world as it 'should be' (D2), and a claim to urgency (U). The audience can repeat a claim, becoming a maker of claims.

Multiple claims compete in societies³; some are more dominant than others, depending on how powerful the maker and their claim-making strategies are (compare e.g. Baumgartner & 2026). As a result of a crisis claim, action is seemingly needed and justified to deal with the claimed crisis and, at times, even prevent the worsening of such a claimed crisis.

Another important aspect of our framework is that it allows an analysis of the evolution of a crisis claim and the different extent to which a crisis claim can have an impact at different moments, depending on the number of claims and actors making the claims, among other factors. An accumulation of claims, made repetitively and by a larger number of actors, can become a — more or less widely spread — narrative. To explain the diffusion of crisis claims, we draw on literature in social sciences and communication that looks in depth at how behavior spreads and diffuses. Centola (2018) outlines the main puzzle of diffusion: not everything spreads in the same way. Diseases and simple information, for example, appear to spread more easily in the sense that they require a single activated contact for transmission. Simple information is defined by Centola (2018) as information which transmits after one exposure, without needing social reinforcement. On the other hand, more complex information and behavior might require a different process in diffusion. Complex information “typically

³ Think, for example, of the case of the Gukurahundi massacre, which took place in Zimbabwe between 1982 and 1987 at the hands of the Fifth Brigade, an armed force of the Zimbabwe Africa People's Union (ZAPU), targeting dissidents. The government has never acknowledged the killings and has denied there was a genocide, while local sources testify that at least 20,000 people were murdered in the massacre (Lawal, 2024). The government is denying the fact itself (e.g., the massacre, D1) while other actors (local sources, local and international NGOs) not only present the fact (D1) but also qualify it as a massacre, a genocide or a humanitarian crisis (D2). We see here multiple claims coexisting whether a crisis existed.

involves some kind of cost (financial, psychological or reputational), risk, complementarity which increases an adopter's dependence on other people's decisions" (Centola, 2018: 36). While the news of a disruptive event happening could be considered as spreading of simple information (e.g., factual events, news articles), a crisis claim involves a normative judgement surrounding such event and, as such, needs social reinforcement. Information about the situation or facts in question can be spread as simple information, but the crisis claim-making process around the event constitutes complex information. This means that the costlier, higher risk or less familiar a crisis claim is, the more the decision to adopt it might depend on social confirmation. Individuals and groups often search for confirmation in society in a way that confirms their prior beliefs and values (Bikhchandani et al. 2024; Buchanan 2008). As a result, receiving complex information that appears costlier and higher in risk or less familiar will bring audiences to search for confirmation of prior beliefs and values shared with the surrounding society with which they share most of these values.

Centola (2018) identifies at least four social mechanisms through which complex information diffuses in societies. These mechanisms explain why the diffusion of complex information may require exposure to multiple sources of activation, as opposed to the diffusion of simple information, and can explain how a crisis claim spreads:

- Strategic complementarity — the value of a crisis claim increases with the number of others who adopt it;
- Credibility — the more people who adopt a crisis claim, the more believable it is that the claim is beneficial or that it is worth the cost of adoption;
- Legitimacy — the more people who adopt a crisis claim, the greater the expectation is that other people will approve of the decision to adopt and the lower the risk of embarrassment or sanction;
- Emotional contagion — the excitement associated with adopting a crisis claim increases with the number of others who adopt it.

The successful diffusion of a crisis claim depends largely on these four mechanisms, although we consider power and status as the main ingredients for success beyond the number of people who subscribe to a particular claim. The theory of the diffusion of complex information provides additional insights not only into spatial diffusion (some people and clusters — makers, audiences — may be better connected than others) but also into increasing density and exposure (what are the ties that influence us and how do claim non-adopters influence the decision to accept a claim?) showing that the more ties people have, the more reinforcement they may need

to be convinced of and accept a crisis claim. An additional aspect to consider when analyzing crisis claim-making processes and their diffusion is the importance of high-status actors (as makers or audience) in influencing people connected to them: some people are more influential than others, but an audience can also be more susceptible to influence. There may be moments in which people are more influential or susceptible to influence, and this can change over time. As a result, context and time are crucial in analyzing the diffusion of complex information, together with the environment and the network around people making and accepting crisis claims.

Attention to the diffusion of complex information has also been given by communication scholars examining moral panics: suddenly arising overreaction to forms of deviance, change, or wrongdoing framed by the media and believed to be threats to the moral order (Cohen 2011; Critcher 2017). While moral panics are portrayed as entirely constructed – especially by the media –, we read these public reactions as claims of a (moral) crisis, which can account for critiques of moral panics as being vague around the actual diffusion and rationality. If a moral panic is irrational and the reaction disproportionate, this implies an actor making a judgement: a claim to a (moral) crisis that diffuses in the public consciousness with the aid of media representations and can subside as quickly as it emerges (Critcher 2017). Our approach, which considers how claims are made, by whom, for whom and how they can spread, provides a complete and exhaustive framework for considering the concept of crisis, defined as the result of a claim-making process.

Application to different types of crises

To apply this theorization to empirics, we present four examples of how a crisis can be claimed or not: (a) the economic and financial crisis of 2008, (b) the Covid-19 crisis, (c) the EU migration crisis of 2015, and (d) the climate crisis. These examples are meant to illustrate how the conceptualization can be applied to different crises. We do not attempt to trace each aspect of claims-making, as we lack the space to go into the necessary depth. Nevertheless, we emphasize the potential to develop the empirical analysis of each part of the presented theoretical framework more in-depth.

The 2008 economic and financial crisis has been called a “global financial earthquake” (Mathiason, 2008) and “one of the biggest financial and economic crises in a century” (Mombelli, 2018). Issues like recession, unemployment, or poverty are typically connected and consequential to an economic crisis; indeed, this was very much the case in 2008. The claim of a crisis started in the United States in September 2008 after Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, and it rapidly spread to Europe where central institutions of the European Union

— the European Central Bank at the forefront — reiterated the crisis claim together with influential and powerful international organizations like the International Monetary Fund. The involvement of powerful and influential actors referring to precise facts (i.e., bankruptcies, unemployment figures) may suggest an external crisis that is merely described or discovered by these actors. The crisis as claim conceptualization does not deny or discard what recession, unemployment and poverty entail or question their existence. It does, however, provide a basis to understand how the view that there was an economic crisis became widely accepted. We can see that there are makers of the claim (M), be these journalists or international organizations. They emphasize a situation (D1), economic facts like bankruptcy and the stock market's decrease, which are widely understood as undesirable (D2). We also need an assertion of urgency to avoid worse outcomes (U) and an audience (A) who accept the claim and can reproduce the claim subsequently. In addition, we can identify the mechanisms for the diffusion of this specific crisis claim that come into play once a crisis claim is created: strategic complementarity, credibility and legitimacy combined with several high-status actors have enhanced the diffusion of complex information. A close examination of the process and context in which such claims are made can help to determine how susceptible the audience is and why an audience may be more susceptible to one claim at one moment than another.

While in the case of the 2008 economic crisis, the analysis of the situation (D) was probably widely shared, it is the emphasis on urgency (U) that differentiated the situation from other recessions, namely the argument that immediate action was required to prevent economic collapse and widespread poverty. To highlight that the analysis of a situation (D1) on its own does not make a crisis, let us illustrate this by highlighting recent data on poverty in the European Union, which show that poverty rates were higher in 2022 than in 2008 (risk of poverty rate as a measure of relative income poverty: 22.0 percent of the population in 2022, compared to 16.6 percent in 2008, Eurostat, 2023). Nevertheless, few described the situation in 2022 as a crisis — possibly except for some NGOs dedicated to the cause (Mussida & Sciulli 2022). By highlighting these figures, we are not making a statement about the counterfactual of what would have happened in 2008 if nothing had been done, but we are highlighting that a (convincing) claim had to be made for the crisis to exist.

The case of Covid-19 allows us to highlight that crisis claims can be disputed for different reasons. While there were reports of a mysterious disease in China at the end of 2019, the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 30 January 2020 put a definitive stamp of a health crisis that lasted until 5 May 2023 when the WHO declared an end to the emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. While health data, such as the number

of patients or deaths, may look similar to economic data at first, the Covid-19 pandemic made visible disagreements at different levels. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was disagreement on the situation (D1), the level to which this was problematic situation (D2), and whether urgent action (U) was required. Different experts and pundits (M) could not agree whether there were abnormally many people hospitalized for respiratory syndromes (D1) or whether people ill with Covid-19 required different attention than those down with a common cold, for example (D2). Depending on the situation (D1), assertions of urgency (U) — the uncontrolled spread characteristic of a pandemic, the economic consequences, etc. — were more or less credible to audiences (A) who may be decision-makers not trained in relevant areas. For example, when Southern European countries (notably Italy and Spain) started to talk of a crisis at the beginning of 2020 and declared a state of emergency, Northern European governments, most notably the Netherlands and the UK, disputed part of the claim at the level of the argument (D) and urgency (U). The legitimacy of the WHO as an actor able to interpret the situation (D) and assess the urgency (U) made crisis claims by the WHO — the declaration of a pandemic — credible to the audience (A) and many measures were taken to counter the crisis (Piccoli et al. 2021). The fact that an end to the pandemic could be declared in 2023 highlights that the situation (D) alone cannot define a crisis: the virus can still kill, scientific knowledge and control practices mean a decreased urgency (U), and claims of an ongoing crisis find little resonance with a larger audience (A). The importance of the audience (A) was also visible when it came to the suggestion that herd immunity would resolve the situation, as proclaimed by the governments of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom at the beginning of 2020 (Sibony 2020). The situation on the ground was not disputed (D1). However, it was argued that illness is not undesirable because it strengthens immunity (D2) — or because the desired outcome of not many people dying (D2) is achieved by inaction — so there is no urgency (U) to implement other measures. Here, crisis claims by the WHO and health experts were rejected by the respective governments (Basu, 2020).

Our third example takes us to (European) discourses and narratives of migration as a crisis. Human mobility is often linked to crisis, but certain migration routes and certain people on the move have been claimed to be more disruptive than others. Some migrants are described as socially and culturally incompatible with and disruptive to the receiving systems in Europe, despite the increasing evidence of the inaccuracy of this portrayal (Cole 2000; Rosenberg 2022; Teye 2022).

UNHCR figures show that in 2015, the year of the so-called migration crisis, 1 million people had reached Europe across the Mediterranean, mainly towards Greece and Italy (D1).

3,735 of these people on the move were missing and are believed to have drowned (Clayton & Holland, 2015). Some have argued that one million people is a large number (D2) and that European migration and asylum policies were not prepared to deal with such a large number of people entering the continent through its southern borders. As a result, according to them, 2015 constituted a crisis of migration — where people on the move were seen as causing disruption on the European continent (Lillie et al. 2023; Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi 2013). The same was not widely claimed in 2022 and 2023, where a total of Ukrainian refugees four times higher than the numbers of 2015 were welcomed by EU member states without widely shared claims of a crisis of migration. In this case, an actor (European Commission, media outlets, member states government and politicians) makes a claim where there is a situation (D1: 1 million people crossing the Mediterranean) that is defined as unacceptable (D2) and requires an urgent response (U): such claims are then diffused in European institutions and have come to constitute a narrative around migration. The example cited above shows how the same actors (e.g., European institutions, M) report some migration flows to Europe as a crisis, but they do not claim the same for larger movements of people crossing different borders. The situation (D1) of people moving in more or less large groups is presented differently. The former is presented as undesirable as it is not what it ‘should’ be (D2), while the latter is considered desirable or acceptable (e.g., Ukrainian refugees should be welcome in Europe). The public understanding of what a situation ‘should’ be in these cases highly depends on the understanding of the migrants’ deservingness (e.g., some migrants deserve to be welcome while others do not). Some migration scholars argue that it would, therefore, be preferable to refer to a migration *policy* crisis and avoid framing the migrants as the problem (Dines et al. 2018; Fassi & Lucarelli 2021; Rosenberg 2022; Teye 2022). Our approach suggests both framings are claims of crises, one claiming that some migrants are the problem and the other that responses to them are the problem (i.e., migration governance).

Our conceptualization also applies at the micro, local level, where crisis claims are not always broadly heard. The case of Ceuta and Melilla also illustrates an effective application of our conceptualization. On these peculiar borders, tragic events have been extensively covered by the media, creating an image of crisis and disruption at certain moments (e.g., the 2022 Melilla Massacre; the 2021 Morocco-Spain border incident) while the constant situation of deaths at sea and land border is not narrated to the same extent (Calderón Vázquez et al. 2023). The border crisis is thus not always highly mediatized and presented by the media and powerful political actors (M), while the deaths (D1) and disruptions — disruptive facts — continue to take place at the border, and the desirability of people not dying daily at the border does not

change — D2). These events are claimed as crises at the borders and accepted by an audience (A) at certain moments (M, D, U), while at other moments, nobody makes a claim (M) and the facts (D) are not publicized or recognized as events related to a crisis.

Even if the situation at the border is claimed to be a crisis, there are different processes: For example, influential and visible media outlets (M) like *The Guardian* and *EU Observer* reported what happened in Melilla in June 2022 (D1) as a massacre, describing it as the “deadliest massacre ever recorded at a European land border” (Novact, Iridia, & EuroMed Rights, 2023; D2), something incomparable to anything ever seen before at European borders and because of the action of the police in response to the disruptive situation. In the first case, although there is a disturbance when a number of people try to cross the fences, the response is described as massacre and unprecedented, something that cannot be considered ‘normal’ or ‘desirable’ (D2). By contrast, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez described the response not only as adequate, but as honorable, congratulating Spanish and Moroccan forces for their conduct. For this specific actor (M), the response is thus as it ‘should’ be (D2), and the claim of a massacre that needs a response (i.e., accountability of the operating forces on the border) is not accepted. We can see that a claim-maker (M) can also, naturally, be an audience (A) rejecting, in this case, a claim of crisis on the border. For the Spanish government, the undesirable situation (D2) and, therefore, a crisis would have existed if the forces had not responded as they did, focusing on unauthorized border-crossing as undesirable. From their perspective, $D1 = D2$. For other actors $D1 \neq D2$, so they still claimed a crisis (of humanitarian response and government accountability).

In the last example, we apply the conceptualization of crises as claims to climate change, a phenomenon that has had disproportionately negative effects on groups that already experience widespread disadvantage in societies, such as indigenous peoples (González et al. 2022) or other minority groups (Bağcı, 2023). In this context, some regard climate change as a crisis inherent in the way the world is organized, where some communities, such as indigenous peoples, have for decades experienced soil degradation, floods, or failing harvests, situations that are now referred to as a ‘crisis’ in western media. Activists from the Global South (M) have long made claims of a crisis to raise awareness of disruptive events in regions of the Global South (D), but these were ignored by powerful policy actors and media from the Global North through “convenient ignorance” (Mlaba, 2021). Mlaba (2021) reflects on how crisis claims by Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate (M) were unheard of and largely ignored by powerful western policy actors and media (A) and how protests in the African continent were also not heard by an audience in the Global North (A in Europe, US). In the sense that the claim never reached

the audience in the Global North, there was no climate ‘crisis’ or widespread discussions on the constituents of the claim (D1, D2).

The crisis claims of activist Greta Thunberg (M) reached and were accepted by a wider European audience (A) partly because of the increase in climate-related emergencies in the Global North (D1). Greta Thunberg’s climate crisis claim increasingly became accepted by an audience. Diffusion theory helps explain why one crisis claim did not spread far, while the other was successfully accepted. A claim-maker can diffuse a crisis claim more successfully when they have higher status and visibility, but also if the audience’s positive perception of the claim-maker facilitates diffusion. Given that crisis claims are complex pieces of information, the more costly, risky or unfamiliar they are, the more the decision to accept them will likely depend on social confirmation. Such social confirmation is found in familiar contexts: Vanessa Nakate’s claims did not have Greta Thunberg’s visibility in the Global North due to the audience’s distance from and ignorance of her cause. The level of exposure to activation mechanisms, such as strategic complementarity, credibility, legitimacy and emotional contagion, varies across contexts and audiences. In Europe, climate crisis claims are more likely to be accepted by younger generations, sometimes referred to as Gen Z and Millennials; older generations feel more threatened and have stronger emotional reactions to the disruption caused by climate change (Eurobarometer, 2023). In the US, just 37 percent of the population regard climate change as a ‘crisis’ and agree with the urgency to take measures (U, Pasquini et al., 2023). As a result, despite the same situation on the ground (D1), support for measures to address climate change varies between the US and Europe.

Crisis claim-making in the case of climate change constitutes an example of the evolution of crisis claims into a narrative — created through the accumulation of claims not only over time but also through different makers (M). The complex information of a climate crisis claim has been diffused through the mechanisms outlined above and has undergone a process of social confirmation that has exposed it to a number of activation sources around the globe, which accept and subsequently spread the claim. It is becoming difficult *not* to be familiar with events linked to climate change, so that for certain audiences it requires more effort not to accept the claim. On the other hand, an increase in familiarity with the cause, which increases social confirmation, exposed the claim to the aforementioned mechanisms: strategic complementarity, credibility, legitimacy and emotional contagion. In this sense, a number of high-status and influential actors accepting the claim may also have increased exposure to these mechanisms.

Relationship to existing work

Through our framework, we aim to reconcile existing conceptualizations of crises, in particular objectivist and constructivist approaches to crises, that may seem opposed: one investigates crises as objectifiable events, taking them at face-value, the other looks at crises as a concept or construct that accumulates meaning through a subject's analysis of an empirical event over time and space – crises are primarily created and shaped by the subject.

An objectivist approach to crises takes a crisis as a fact and focuses on examining its causes and effects, namely why and how it was created, what its effects have been, and what the responses of the different actors have been. In this sense, a crisis is an event that causes disruptive change in/to a specific society (Walby 2015). Some objectivist research on crises has taken a more reflexive turn, regarding crises as events and facts, but as facts that can always be interpreted in societies, and these interpretations have different implications (Kriesi et al. 2012; Walby 2015). Although objectivist research on crises is aware that crises are potentially constructed and instrumentalized, the scope of objectivist research on crisis remains focused on the origins, effects and responses to a crisis (crisis management), rather than on the processes of construction. In objectivist research, we recognize a maker (M) discovering a crisis situation (D) where urgency is evident (U). Objectivist research focuses on crisis claims that have already been accepted by an audience (A), which is therefore absent from consideration. Our framework highlights that objectivist crisis research focuses on the construction of crises that appears most credible in a given context: the credibility and success of a crisis claim may be due to the nature and perceptions of D1 and D2, the presence of U or the nature of M and their legitimacy and power. For example, it is certainly possible to objectively study the impact of economic crises on poverty, but we emphasize that not all crises are the same (due to differences in the claims process) and that the notion of crisis may not always be directly helpful in understanding why issues, such as poverty and recession, emerge as crises.

While constructivist research on crises investigates in-depth processes of construction, instrumentalization and politicization of such events, it focuses primarily on concepts rather than facts. A constructivist approach would focus on how crises are perceived, and how this perception is influenced by and constantly intertwined with the narrative around the specific disruptive event that is perceived as a crisis (see Cohen 2018 and Pierson 2004 for detailed accounts on how timing matters for politics). Narratives and discourse are thus key elements in the constructivist analysis of crises, concepts that constructivists argue cannot be understood independently of the narrative used to define and interpret them: narratives that shape public perceptions of a crisis (Innerarity 2022; Roitman 2013; Seeger & Sellnow 2016). As a result, it

is narratives that shape the meaning and, ultimately, the power and impact of a crisis. Because of this focus on narratives, a constructivist approach would examine the creation of a crisis claim by a maker (M), while paying less attention to the acceptance or rejection of created claims by audiences (A). Moreover, while constructivists highlight how crises are created by actors through actions and narratives (see for example Alexander 2019), we typically do not learn much about the ingredients of a crisis (D, U) and consequently on why some crisis claims appear to be more successful than others. By explicitly outlining the claims-making process, we have specific constituents of the claim (i.e., makers, arguments, urgencies/calls to actions, audiences) and, as a result, space for power and legitimacy. Constructivist accounts considering claims in the context of crises have introduced an insightful and rich concept (Kalkman 2019; Spector 2019, 2022), but we can discern little effort in going beyond the concept of crisis as claim and build a framework that would help understanding its diffusion and the interaction with the other actors within the process (such as other claim-makers, actors playing a role in the diffusion of the claim, the audience accepting or rejecting a claim). Indeed, while Spector (2019, 2022) conceptualizes crises as claims and focuses on discursive construction, his approach remains primarily concerned with language and meaning-making. Our framework extends this by (a) incorporating the role of audiences and legitimacy, (b) integrating objectivist elements through the explicit distinction between D1 (facts) and D2 (normative judgements), and (c) theorizing diffusion mechanisms that explain why some crisis claims spread while others fail. This allows us to bridge constructivist and objectivist approaches and to analyze crisis claims as social processes rather than solely discursive acts.

Our framework does not deny the importance of disruptive empirical events and that we should study their causes and effects such as *visibilization* (compare Strolovitch 2023). Rather, it focuses on the potential of such an event to become a crisis claim through the process described above. Empirical events considered disruptive are thus no less important or less vital for the crisis to exist, but they are part of a claims-making process. By making disruptive events part of this framework, we aim to actively avoid a relativist approach to crisis: the nature of disruptive events can be investigated reporting specific evidence of the damages suffered by a specific community and context and the absence of a claim on a specific disruptive event does not automatically make the consequences of a disruptive event disappear. The absence of a crisis claim or rejection thereof by an audience does not define the nature of the disruptive event. In this sense, we call for more reflection on how disruptive events come to be and how their development and the responses to them are influenced by a specific crisis-claim process.

In other words, disruptive events can be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for a successful crisis claim. This does not belittle the tangible consequences of a disruptive event. We can effectively and coherently investigate disruptive events, the crisis claim-making process and its societal and political implications. Drawing on constructivist approaches, our theoretical framework recognizes the importance of multiple actors at different levels — explicitly adding the audience as a relevant actor (A). We argue that an objectivist approach to crisis does not have to be in contraposition with a constructivist approach. Instead, for an analysis of crises to be thorough, both objectivist and constructivist approaches are needed, a combination made possible with the “crisis as claims” framework.

Some strands of constructivist literature have reflected on crisis language as embedded in political discourse and the inevitability of crisis definitions and terminology being political (McConnell 2020). This aligns with work on securitization and blame politics (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986), which similarly examines how actors elevate issues to the level of existential threat or assign responsibility in ways that shape public understanding. Indeed, some scholars have warned against what they regard as a misuse of the crisis concept and reflected on the dangers of its political implications (Dines et al. 2018; Masco 2017; Teye 2022). McConnell (2020) takes a less dramatic view, arguing that we should not worry about the lack of “singular meanings for crisis” and “criticizing actors for the abuse of the term” because our understanding of crisis should accept “that complex and contested crisis language and definitions are in themselves manifestations of politics in political societies” (p.1). Our conceptualization offers clarity and an effective solution to this debate on the concept, focusing on the politics of crisis claims without disregarding the potential dangers and policy implications. The theoretical framework offers a “singular meaning of” crisis (as claims), but one that is sufficiently broad to allow the investigation of processes leading to crisis claims and their consequences. What is common in all crises is the process through which actors claim them. It follows that the process of crisis claims-making is a manifestation of politics in societies because, at different moments of crisis claims-making, there is room for different and diverse levels of the political. With that, the perspective of crises as claims helps us see different strategies for politicizing and depoliticizing issues without the need to deny the existence of disruptive events and responses to them that do not take the political into consideration.

Just as reflecting on the process of crisis claims-making recognizes the political in crises, it does not allow for an inevitability of crises at face value (Berkowitz 2022). The politics of inevitability teaches us to ignore inconvenient facts and rewrite history to fit a predetermined narrative. Arguably, this dialectical way of thinking can make good what appears to be bad

(Berkowitz, 2022). McConnell (2020) argues that a crisis being political might seem bad, but it is impossible for the concept *not* to be political. Our conceptualization highlights that different aspects of the process are exposed to political forces, but it does not follow that crises as such are inevitably political. Instead, we provide a tool to attentively study the processes that may end in crisis claims but may also produce failed attempts in claiming a crisis.

Discussion & Conclusion

Given how common the term ‘crisis’ is in academic and political discourse, it is not surprising that the literature has provided different definitions of the concept, many of which offer a partial view that makes it difficult to compare and synthesize findings from different studies. With this, it is difficult to design ways to respond effectively to disruptive events. Rather than arguing for the superiority of one of the existing approaches, we provide a framework of “crises as claims” that consolidates objectivist and constructivist approaches by identifying their role in specific part of the process through which crises are claimed. This theorization is broad and helps operationalize crises empirically and identify the many aspects of crises (as dependent and independent variables, origins, practice, consequences), and can apply to all kinds of crises. With that, we help make ‘crisis’ a useful concept for the social sciences and humanities more generally, both for quantitative and qualitative studies.

The theoretical framework also allows us to highlight the coloniality of existing conceptualizations of crisis in the social sciences and humanities. We argue that there is an — unexplored — colonial aspect present when international crises, such as global economic crises, are claimed. If we follow existing approaches, crises are seen as ruptures of the normal. As innocuous and neutral as the ‘normal’ may seem, it assumes a universal normal modelled on the Global North: a period of political stability and economic prosperity. The crisis as claim perspective makes apparent that such an understanding of the ‘normal’ as a situation of stability and predictability might not necessarily apply beyond countries of the Global North (Roitman 2013; Rydstrom 2022). Instead, the notion of ‘normal’ is part of the claim where the ‘is’ (D1) and the ‘should’ (D2) are compared and can therefore be different for countries of the Global South or the so-called 4th World geographically located in the Global North. The proposed framework efficiently conceptualizes normality and helps to overcome this universalistic and exclusionary approach. The understanding of what “should be” may vary in different regions of the world and is influenced by power relations. As a result, the theoretical framework helps us not necessarily to view the Global South as being in ‘perpetual crisis’ through distant and misinformed lenses but to give local contexts the space they need, yet it allows for universals such as human rights to exist (D2) and inform perceptions of crises.

We argue that our theoretical framework allows future research to use the concept of crisis in a systematic and thus comparable manner, especially because it encourages us to consider crisis claims as deeply connected to a specific context and a process of claims-making. The aim here is not relativist but reflexive: although the existence and occurrence of disruptive events is undeniable, the interpretation of these events can vary, leading to specific crisis claims (or lack thereof). Because we include the audience as part of the process, which crisis claims are accepted may vary, and future research should explore the circumstances under which crisis claims are more likely to be accepted. As disruptive events occur, there is no objective interpretation of these events in absolute terms: the crisis as claim framework can help to understand why there are different interpretations and to reconcile them in academic analysis. Future research should take these different interpretations of the different aspects of crisis claims seriously and explore them rather than imposing a supposedly universalist concept of what normality is or should be. We believe that this makes our theoretical framework a useful basis to study the nature and consequences of crisis in many situations, including policymaking and crisis management.

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Empirical Article I

‘A tale of two cities’: Migration and resentment through the eyes of shopkeepers in Lombardy

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Abstract

This article examines the interplays between outward and inward migration and the emergence of resentment in two cities in the Italian region of Lombardy. Drawing on the concept of ‘resentful affectivities,’ we conducted 43 ethnographically-informed interviews with shopkeepers in Pavia and Mantova. Through the emotional lenses of discontent, distrust, and nostalgia, we trace how resentful affectivities shape, interconnect, and potentially mobilize discourses around emigration and immigration. In particular, these three emotions link migration issues to normative expectations of democracy, often translating complex social-political dynamics into resentful affectivities through emigration and immigration narratives that give coherence to empty-crowded paradoxes. Emigration and immigration are articulated into resentful affectivities as the two sides of the same coin – the ‘best Italians’ are leaving while less-deserving/-desirable foreigners are arriving – with shopkeepers attributing varying degrees of agency to this dual movement, which integrates or illustrates broader criticisms to political elites. We argue that these notions connect emigration and immigration, not as counterbalancing each other, but rather through an overarching idea that broader phenomena with specific culprits are weakening and may potentially destroy a community that is nostalgically fantasized in opposition to every present facet inspiring discontent and distrust. Our contribution unveils the impact of unfulfilled expectations of political representation on resentful narratives of emigration and immigration.

Keywords

Resentful affectivities, migration-emotions nexus, crisis of representation, mobility, shopkeepers

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Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

The renowned opening line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* intertwines perception and emotion through paradoxical descriptions. It is through paradoxes that shopkeepers in Pavia and Mantova seem to make sense of and ascribe meaning to their world. And this paradoxical nature of everyday life evokes emotions, which are reflected in discourses that create social and political meanings, and make overlapping, sometimes contrasting, narratives intelligible.

One such emotion is resentment, which, we argue, elicits a subset of emotions, shaping worldviews and having political implications that can be either active or passive. We shall use the term resentful affectivities to cover active and passive manifestations of resentment seen through the lens of three emotions: discontent, distrust, and nostalgia. A crucial implication of resentful affectivities pertains to the view purported by those who are governed about those who govern: citizens may feel that the government does not act in the common interest, in conformity to a specific national culture, or that those who govern act in ways that may potentially destabilize the political, social, territorial, and/or economic balance of the country. This perceived gap between the expectations of those who are governed and what they argue that the government does or does not do has the potential to constitute a veritable crisis of representation: the public may feel less, or not at all, represented by its elected representatives. We examine the resentful affectivities harbored by *commercianti* [shopkeepers], a specific group that is historically known to be susceptible to the politics of resentment.

Looking at the petite bourgeoisie in urban contexts of the wealthy region of Lombardy may seem counterintuitive, given a long-lasting political emphasis on less affluent, less infrastructurally developed and more isolated regions. However, recent research on “left-behind places” (Pike et al., 2023) has broadened their spatial imaginary to interregional inequalities and political shocks amidst conflicting political and economic narratives, such as those leading to Brexit (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2021). Furthermore, “place resentment” (Munis, 2022) has been reclaimed beyond rural settings and strictly socio-economic terms to encompass small- and medium-sized cities with a history, or at least a resemblance, of demographic stability, industrial development, and economic prosperity (Borwein & Lucas, 2023; Cabello, 2021; de Lange et al., 2023; Huijsmans, 2023a). The research developed to date on place resentment seems to be predominantly concerned with its voting outcomes (Jacobs & Munis, 2023; Trujillo & Crowley, 2022), with only a few studies exploring the link between place resentment and

emotions, such as trust in politicians (McKay et al., 2021) or anti-immigrant attitudes (Huijsmans, 2023b). In this paper, we add to this literature by examining emotions underlying different resentful affectivities that cannot be separated from the spatial context in (and against) which they are articulated: the cities of Pavia and Mantova.

We focus on the issue of mobility — encompassing both immigration and emigration — to investigate the articulation of resentful affectivities by shopkeepers. As recent Eurobarometer data suggest⁴, immigration is a highly salient issue all over Europe, being thus key in grievance-utterance and prone to high levels of politicization (Brug, 2015). While Italy has a long-standing history of emigration, the post-2008 financial crisis period has seen a marked increase in the outmigration of highly educated and skilled youth (Tintori & Romei, 2017), part of a widespread, increasingly salient phenomenon of depopulation threatening the EU (Newsham & Rowe, 2023). For this reason, we posit that both presence (immigration) and absence (emigration) have the potential to be articulated into resentful affectivities, even if absence tends to be far more neglected in the literature.

Therefore, we focus on emotions manifested in two urban contexts according to the guiding research question: How is human mobility articulated into resentful affectivities among shopkeepers in Pavia and Mantova? We shall argue that the issue of mobility informs normative expectations of democracy, namely by shopkeepers who may see in this bidirectional issue (outward and inward migration) specific threats to their city and way of life, thus adding to burgeoning resentful affectivities that can, furthermore, be extrapolated to national and transnational levels. Through a subset of emotions, here understood as three lenses of resentment, we operationalize the concept of resentful affectivities, unveiling a social, rather than strictly political, notion of democracy that gives significance to mobility at local, regional, and national levels.

Theoretical Framework

Emotions are an important consideration in the political sphere (Marcus, 2000; Hall, 2009), particularly in shaping or contesting “taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the decision of agents” (Fierke, 2013, p. 209, as cited in Koschut et al., 2017). In the context of mobility politics, “emotions play a bigger role than facts in attitudes to migration” (Sharif, 2019, p. 5) by reinforcing or challenging the arbitrary and self-evidently accepted boundaries of

⁴ According to the Standard Eurobarometer 100 – Autumn 2023, immigration ranks at the top of the most important issues facing the EU, according to its citizens, having increased in salience from May-June to October-November 2023. Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3053> (Accessed: 25 March 2024).

common sense (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2017; Rancière, 2006). Although considerable attention has been given to the migrant viewpoint (De Leersnyder et al., 2011; Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Mahmud, 2021), emotions have become increasingly central to studies shifting the perspective to host societies' public attitudes (Brader et al., 2008; Dennison & Dražanová, 2018; Verkuyten, 2021; Lee, 2023; Xuereb, 2023). This shift in focus can be partly attributed to perceptions of mass immigration and the widespread concern it potentially raises for political, cultural, and social communities and (ethno)national identities (Sniderman et al., 2004; Johnson & Hing, 2005; Lindstam et al., 2021), often overlapping with social status anxiety, EU criticism, and a general hostility toward political elites (Abts & Baute, 2022).

The emphasis on a common culture and identity in notions of the nation-state has made it potentially difficult and conflictual to reconcile the functioning of national political systems with the incorporation of newcomers at the national (McLaren, 2012) and local levels (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2025; Dimitriadis & Ambrosini, 2024). It is thus unsurprising that resentment predominates in the literature on the migration–emotions nexus, highlighting the emergence of democratic dilemmas or “crises of representative democracy” (Salomon, 2020; Celis et al., 2021), and often translating into negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration (Denti, 2022; Dražanová & Gonnot, 2023).

Resentment is typically defined as a negative emotion created by a perceived unjust, disruptive situation where one feels unfairly treated compared to others in society — as being “relatively deprived” (Spruyt et al., 2016). This anger brews over time, conferring to resentment a distinctive sort of moral anger (Celis et al., 2021; Fleury, 2022). For this reason, populism has been directly linked to resentment, alongside hope and anger (Rico et al., 2017; Salmela & von Scheve, 2018; Wagner, 2014). Other authors insist on a semantic distinction between resentment and *ressentiment* (Capelos & Demertzis, 2022; Fassin, 2013). While the former is associated with moral anger and a sense of self-efficacy that can drive political engagement, the latter is a largely unconscious experience presenting feelings of injustice, humiliation, deprivation, and inferiority. To address the interplay between these dimensions, Capelos and Demertzis (2018) coined the concept of “resentful affectivity” to denote the complexity and fluidity of emotions surrounding resentment that *ressentiment* seems to hyperfocus on.

Resentment presents tangible and polarizing challenges to the experience of democratic representation, which manifest in spatial terms (Cohen, 2019). Studies on resentment have taken a spatial turn, according to which populist views are predominantly held by modernization losers. In other words, inhabitants of rural places or medium- and small-sized “broken provincial cities” (Collier, 2018), who feel “left behind” in a metropolization process

accentuating territorial inequalities and marginalizing peripheries, are expected to be more susceptible to feelings of resentment. Such hostility toward place-based outgroups perceived as unfairly advantaged (Munis, 2022) is often designated in the literature as “place resentment.” This concept, blending political, socioeconomic, and cultural elements, has two core claims: (i) populism is driven by resentment, and (ii) this emotion is fueled by periphery–metropole cleavages and dichotomies (Cramer, 2016; Huijsmans, 2023b).

Resentment has also been historically linked to specific social groups, notably shopkeepers, and their political mobilization. In the seminal work on Paris shopkeepers amidst late-nineteenth-century economic changes, Nord (1986) argued that the experience of real decline alongside polarization bred lower middle-class — or *petite bourgeoisie* — resentment. In twentieth-century Italy, shopkeepers frequently found themselves on the same side of nationalist and fascist movements, drawn together by a common rhetoric intertwining cultural reaction and commercial defense. However, these encounters were often opportunistic and rather fortuitous (Morris, 1996). Studies on Italian fascism have reflected on the ambiguity and even suspicion that, more often than not, characterized the relationship between shopkeepers and political movements (Morris, 2002). Shopkeepers’ interests tend to be, furthermore, dominated by local preoccupations (Morris, 1996), with an emphasis on “order, security, expenditure capacity, relative conformity, space attractiveness” that make authoritarian projects particularly attractive to them (Saitta, 2022).

Shopkeepers tend to view themselves in a state of relative deprivation or even “under siege” in relation to something or someone: in their study on shopkeepers in a London neighborhood, Wells and Watson (2005) argued that, due to feelings of loss regarding both economic prosperity and a sense of community, shopkeepers engage with exclusionary narratives on national identity reflecting resentment toward resource distribution. For this reason, in regions where manufacturing has declined, emigration rates have increased, and advanced services have been displaced or remained underdeveloped, the resentful *petite bourgeoisie* has become the ideal target of populist discourses (Margalit, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Resentment never operates on its own — not only does it typically mingle culture, history, and domestic politics (Konciewicz, 2019), but it also incorporates reactive emotions while depoliticizing others (Tuinen, 2020). One such emotion is nostalgia, the longing for a more prosperous, predictable, socially homogeneous (re-imagining of the) past — a “glorious era” that a construed “everyone” can rally around (Elçi, 2022). There is a sense that “something is fundamentally rotten” at the heart of a given society, accompanied by “an omnipresent,

menacing feeling of decline,” of irreversible loss of the very best of a community, of a “golden age” long gone (Gaston & Hilhorst, 2018, pp. 11–12). The majority of the European public can be classified as nostalgic (De Vries & Hoffmann, 2018), a trend reflected in political discourse underscoring the restorative — rather than reflective — framework of nostalgia (Boym, 2008; Duyvendak, 2011), especially in societies dealing with ageing populations, mass immigration, and economic setbacks (Campanella & Dassù, 2019). Nostalgia as a sort of longing and moral superiority of the past (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022) is thus a mechanism of identity continuity, of “thinking of oneself in terms of a particular social identity” (Lammers, 2023) in times of perceived collective threats. For this reason, some authors have also suggested associations between this emotion, nativist narratives (Bertossi et al., 2022; Kešić et al., 2022), and populism (Insero, 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2022; Couperus et al., 2023; Frischlich, 2023).

Discontent, another key emotion encompassed by and leading to resentment (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023), has been on the rise across Europe (Aassve et al., 2024). It can be characterized by a self- or society-centered lack of satisfaction with the state of things (Giebler et al., 2021), also referring to the belief that politics and politicians struggle to offer meaningful, coherent visions of, or any hope for, the future (Elchardus, 2015). Notions of “economic decline” even in historically prosperous regions (Fetzer, 2019; Lenzi & Perucca, 2021; McKay et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose & Vidal-Bover, 2024), as well as the existence of “identity crises” and “cultural conflicts” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), have been highlighted as the main factors contributing to discontent. The belief that the polity has “failed to be responsive to the spectrum of citizens’ needs” fosters discontent (Edwards & Foley, 1997), heightens populism (Rooduijn et al., 2016), and regime antipathy mediated through resentment, potentially increasing negative intergroup attitudes (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023).

Trust in politics is connected to a wide range of social and political outcomes perceived as beneficial to society, from political participation to democracy and stability (Nye et al., 1997; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Uslaner, 2002). Analyses on trust in relation to distrust have provided ambiguous results. Still, the latter has been commonly understood as a general feeling of unease and suspicion toward politics (Korvela & Vento, 2023), or the people’s perception that the political system will act maliciously rather than beneficially (Newton, 2007). While some authors argue varying levels of mis/distrust as an essential component of democracy (Verhoest et al., 2025) with inherent democratic value (Krishnamurthy, 2015), or as an “inevitable inconvenience of democracy” (Orwin, 1984), others point to distrust, an insidious emotion, as the primary rationale behind resentment (Konciewicz, 2019). Distrust is portrayed at best as vigilance in judging components of the political system (often expressed as mistrust), but it

often points to the lack of trust toward the political system (Bunting et al., 2021), with serious implications for democracy: “when mistrust turns into widespread distrust and cynicism, then the quality of democratic representation itself may change” (Zmerli & Meer, 2017, p. 1). The main targets of distrust are often political elites, portrayed as self-interested actors with a personal agenda (Bøggild, 2020). In this context, technical incompetence is not the only explanation advanced for mistakes; there is also a generalized “belief that political actors behave in a way that violates the shared moral norms of fairness and justice” (Bertsou, 2019), thus entailing an ethical dimension.

Racial and ethnic distinctions are engrained in emotional and discursive dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Cancian et al., 2024; Nowicka & Wojnicka, 2023; Silva Rebelo et al., 2022), thus influencing sources, feelings, ascriptions/constructions, and fluidities of belonging (Hedetoft, 2002). Distinctions between “Us” and an “Other” under different terminologies are, therefore, present in attitudes, perceptions, and emotions of host communities regarding migrant populations (De Coninck et al., 2019; Verkuyten et al., 2018). The concept of ethnicity proves particularly helpful in the context of this analysis, since we look at emotions expressed by a social group whose members assert and construct belonging locally (the *Pavesi*, or people from Pavia; and the *Mantovani*, or people from Mantova), regionally (Lombardian), and nationally (the Italians). Although ethnicity has been defined in various ways, the main features of an ethnic group identified by Hutchinson and Smith (1996) are helpful in pinpointing intersections between ethnic identities and emotional responses to e- and im-migration: (i) a “proper name” that identifies and expresses the “essence” of the community; (ii) a sense of fictive kinship provided by a myth of common origin or ancestry; (iii) shared memories of a common past; (iv) elements of a common culture that usually include religion, customs, and language; (v) a symbolic attachment to the ancestral land; and (vi) a sense of solidarity by at least some sections of the community. Addressing socially constructed aspects of ethnic identity in relation to resentful affectivities offers a new perspective on the “ways in which boundaries, identities, and cultures are negotiated, defined and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities” (Nagel, 1994, p. 152).

The why: Relevance of the two cities

The focus on emotions and their role in shaping discourses in changing times appears particularly relevant in the case of Italy and its northern region of Lombardy. The country has undergone challenges related to globalization, technological change, and labor market restructuring, and historically stable or thriving regions have not escaped unscathed. Lombardy, considered one of the most economically stable regions of Italy and characterized by high

economic growth in some of its provinces (Velthuis, 2023), is also a predominantly right-leaning region and the one with the highest immigrant population in absolute terms (ISTAT, 2022).

Lombardy's grounds for emotions underlying resentment manifest in voting preferences and are intensified by immigrant presence (Salomon, 2020) and high emigration levels (Zerka, 2019). Within the regional context, two urban realities stand out as socially and politically representative, while also being cities with wealthy — more remote or recent — pasts: the medium-sized cities of Mantova and Pavia. Mantova, with a population of around 48,000 people, despite presenting an increasing immigration rate (13%) at the provincial level in 2023, well above the national average of 8.5% (Provincia di Mantova, 2023), reports one of the highest rates of emigration in the country at the provincial level (3.6%, according to ISTAT, 2022). Furthermore, the city has a history of electoral preference for the center-left (*centrosinistra*) — although the far-right populist party *Fratelli d'Italia* had a considerable growth, with polarized results in the 2022 general election coming from Mantova.

Pavia is a more populated (70,000 inhabitants) city and, compared to Mantova, has had a more consistent increase, since 2018, of the immigration rate, which is today around 14.5%, also well above the national average. Another noteworthy feature is that Pavia has reinforced a clear-cut center-right (*centrodestra*) preference (Andrino et al., 2022; ISTAT, 2022).

We argue that these two cities offer a meaningful basis for comparison due to their migration profiles and political contexts: Mantova as an emigrant-sender city and Pavia as an immigrant-receiver city; Mantova more polarized in its political preferences and Pavia with a right-wing majority. Moreover, the selection of these cases aligns with the specific aim of our study: to challenge the assumption that urban contexts and their populations — often perceived as “better off” than other areas — are less susceptible to social challenges, tensions, and place resentment. By focusing on shopkeepers' narratives in the urban cores of two northern Italian cities, we investigate how resentful affectivities surface in the ways migration is interpreted, discussed, and emotionally negotiated at the local level.

The how: Methodology

Method of data collection

Data was collected through interviews in the two cities. Fieldwork carried through with “ethnographic sensibility” (Herzog & Zacka, 2019)⁵ allowed us to gather data through (thematically) semi-structured interviews with the selected urban social group and a series of

⁵ “Ethnographic sensibility [...] is concerned with how people perceive, think about and ascribe meaning to their environment and behavior” (Herzog and Zacka, 2019: 764).

observations of the urban contexts. The businesses whose shopkeepers we interviewed were all located in the historical centers — *centro storico* — of the two cities, where we also find the oldest activities⁶. The nature of the small, family-owned businesses was varied: food retail (such as small grocery or delicatessen stores); fabric, shoes, and clothing stores; furniture and home décor/antique shops; bookshops and stationery shops; hardware stores; and two jewelry boutiques.

Our aim was to capture the resentful affectivities of people who witnessed and experienced the city's developments. The demographics of the shopkeepers varied, the youngest interviewee being 24 years old, but the majority of them in their late 40s to early 60s; people falling under the conceptualized categories of, respectively, the baby busters and baby boomers (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). It is key to underline that these generations generally did not grow up in a diverse Italy, which became a country of immigration only in the 1970s and dealt with more significant immigration flows in the early 1990s (Bonifazi et al., 2009). As a result, compared to other European countries, such as France and Germany, these generations of Italians did not witness as many people migrating to and choosing to stay in Italy (Bulli & Soare, 2018) in their formative years, being thus only more recently confronted with the prospect of a diverse, multicultural society.

We developed prompts as interview guidelines to keep the advantages of ethnographic flexibility while being aware that the chosen contexts might spontaneously shape our line of questioning. Keeping weekly reports allowed us — while in two different cities — to jointly reflect on and recalibrate our approach when needed. From November to December 2023, we conducted 43 interviews with shopkeepers, 20 in Pavia and 23 (in 21 local shops) in Mantova. The interviews were conducted in Italian and lasted from 40 minutes to 3 hours (shortest and longest). Speaking to interviewees in their native language while not being locals allowed us to reach out to more people and start the interaction by conveying a sense of curiosity and interest regarding the cities, the area around them, and their ways of life. Reflecting on our positionality allowed us to remain objective while being mindful of our subjectivities (Bourke, 2014): being young researchers who are not local but can interact in Italian allowed us to advance a curious approach, which generally helped make the conversation more pleasant and some potentially sensitive topics less tense, giving the locals space to introduce their contexts and views.

⁶ The *commercianti* (shopkeepers) of the historical city center are the ones who have seen their city, economic standing, business, and clientele change, or even be threatened, over time. They have elaborated social networks (Breu and Marchese, 1998) and bear witness, listen, and narrate through the social interactions and the meaningful shared practices revolving around selling and buying (Everts, 2010).

Our prompts⁷ aimed at delimiting the answers to the topics that were more obviously of interest to our research, but we allowed digressions and some more dialogic dynamics that were also telling of the shopkeepers' preoccupations, grievances, and worldviews. Through the opening general prompts, we gathered information regarding the history of the business and its development, which allowed us to delve deeper into the current challenges. The prompt approach was successful due to its flexibility, enabling us to adjust it to our interlocutor and thus creating an environment where the interviewee could be comfortable sharing insights on potentially sensitive topics. The strategy was helpful in our first contacts, to counter some initial reluctance. Additionally, we noticed that the timing of the interviews was also relevant: the closer to Christmas, a particularly busy time, the more stressed and easily triggered our interlocutors tended to be. However, the upcoming festivities also highlighted particular anxieties and expectations harbored by shopkeepers that were helpful insofar as they rendered it easier or seemingly more opportune to identify certain grievances, tensions, and culprits, thus providing essential insights into their current situation in these two cities.

Method of data analysis

We apply specific lenses according to three emotional dimensions shopkeepers use when expressing resentful affectivities: discontent, distrust and nostalgia. They express, interconnect, and overlap with the resentful affectivities expressed by shopkeepers when conveying experiences of injustice, a sense of deprivation, and moral anger, particularly when linking specific problems, institutions, and culprits to immigration and emigration. Expressions and attitudes conveying a sense of dissatisfaction with the current situation were placed under the lens of discontent. In the same way, expressions and attitudes expressing doubt, uncertainty, skepticism and suspicion were under the lens of distrust, while those conveying a yearning for a return to an irrecoverable past were referred to through the lens of nostalgia.

Drawing on our previous theoretical discussion, Table 1 outlines the elements we look for in the discourse to connect it to a predominant lens. We do not necessarily look for key terms but rather for recurring sentences, formulations, and attitudes translating specific feelings associated with each lens. Although our interviewees tend to incorporate all these emotions into their discourse, they do so unevenly; thus, isolating emotions through lenses allows us not only to comprehend how the emotion in question is rationalized vis-a`-vis resentful affectivities but

⁷ Interview prompts are available upon request. We touched upon topics such as the history and current situation of the business and the city in relation to the region and the country, together with questions on those leaving and arriving in the city (emigrants and immigrants). We gave space to all interviewees to elaborate on what they consider to be the most pressing societal challenges.

also understand the migration narratives called forth by each of these emotions and their interconnections.

Table 1. Operationalization of the emotional lenses

Lenses	What do these lenses entail in the discourse?
Discontent	Terms referring to a lack of satisfaction towards: • Society as a whole, globally; • Italy and Italians; • The regional/local administration; • The local community, <i>Pavesi</i> and <i>Mantovani</i>.
Distrust	Terms that refer to a general ‘lack of trust’ and feeling of unease showing suspicion towards: • Society as a whole, globally; • Italy and Italians; • The regional/local administration; • The local community, <i>Pavesi</i> and <i>Mantovani</i>.
Nostalgia	Terms that refer to a longing for a better or morally superior past, expressing a rejection of the present situation that has clear implications to imaginings of the future: • At the national level, in Italy; • At the local level, in Pavia or Mantova.

Shopkeepers and resentful affectivities in Pavia

Although diverse, the shopkeepers’ community in Pavia presents similar patterns in how it conveys these resentful affectivities embodied in the specific frames of discontent, distrust and nostalgia. Discontent is mainly linked to the city’s administration with the recurrent statement that “the municipality does not do anything/does not care.” The administration does not appear to fulfil its duties, and the city is *lasciata andare*, left to its decline, becoming less and less cared for, sleepy and inactive. More specifically, when referring to a perceived lack of activity and vibrancy, a few interviewees refer to the city as a ‘dormitory,’ a place where people go to sleep in more affordable housing, despite working in neighboring bigger cities.

In addition, the administration does not seem to care to support the *commercianti* and their small, family-owned businesses in the historical center as there is some frustration regarding immigrants setting up and taking over thriving businesses while Italian ones appear

to be sinking. An interviewee mentions that “with all of these big chains, Chinese, Pakistanis, and Moroccans taking over, we [small family businesses] have been struggling.” These immigrant-owned businesses are equated to big chains, and the competitiveness of their services is emphasized to explain why they attract more clients. Despite a racially-charged wording when mentioning “*tutti questi cinesi, pachistani e marocchini*,” shopkeepers direct their resentful affectivities to a perceived injustice regarding the disadvantages posed to small (Italian) family businesses rather than expressing an outright dislike of newcomers due to their origins: their foreign-ness emphasizes a perceived unfair disadvantage imposed to those who belong to the local and national *ethnie*. The agent of this perceived unfairness, however, is not the immigrant, but rather the local administration, accused of not acting in support of small, ‘historical’ businesses. More often than not, immigrants and immigration are painted with a broad brush. This population tends to be mentioned as a monolithic entity, without much attention being paid to different backgrounds or personal challenges. These generalizations also impact the way shop-keepers link their discontent toward immigration to how the Italian state receives and manages newcomers. “It is easy to let people in the country and let them work on the streets and abandon them without giving them any reassurance or support,” explains the female owner of a historical shop in Corso Garibaldi, “look at how they are treated [...] if they knew this is the miserable life that awaits them here in Italy, I am not sure they would leave their countries.”

Interviewees also emphasize the lack of social and cultural activities in the city. The administration, in particular, is accused of having been increasingly preoccupied with transforming Pavia into a city of services instead of fostering a sense of community. In addition to a perceived negligence from the local administration, interviewees report discontent regarding the overall relationships within the city, portraying the *Pavesi* as provincial and close-minded people who like tranquility and look at change with suspicion; a mentality that purportedly helped creating a ‘stagnant society.’ Some interviewees also convey discontent regarding the *italiani* as a people: “if Italy has problems, it owes them to itself.” Judgments are passed on the ‘spendthrift’ character of the Italians, to whom “all is a show,” while there is also a paradoxical acknowledgement of their hardworking qualities as a people, even in face of adversity. One interviewee, in particular, reveals discontent regarding concrete social problems revolving around dire situations affecting immigrants and nationals alike; a discontent that has, furthermore, potential to spread social unrest:

“[...] As groups of people arrive, there will be good and not-so-good people [among them]. [...] And through my volunteer work, I notice social unrest in all social groups, not specifically or solely

linked to immigrants. I am hurting because when I see these things [immigrants begging in the streets and homeless nationals in the humid winter cold], I believe that we – the part of society that is doing better – have failed.” (Male shopkeeper, artisan)

Many interviewees do not trust the administration to implement what is best for Pavia as there is a strong assumption that the administration “does not care and has only contributed to the city’s destruction.” In addition, some interviewees reflect on how this is a more general problem of Italian institutions that “sometimes even create and build things but are not able to follow through and maintain what they created or promised.” Given a sense of relative deprivation, many interviewees express a generalized suspicion toward those doing seemingly well. Immigrants are, at times, the target of such sentiments, as some immigrant-owned businesses appear to succeed while our interlocutors complain about “immigrants walking around the city and doing nothing.” This suspicion regarding the nature of immigration in Italy is described in the hesitant words of an interviewee stating that “I better not speak of immigration because [...] these things are bigger than us, it is not really clear what lies underneath [migration policies].” This perception of the world and society is deeply embedded in distrust, one of this group’s manifested resentful affectivities, with an assumption that some obscure interest underlies a social issue or a specific phenomenon, something authorities, powerful actors, or immigrants themselves might be hiding from the public.

Regarding nostalgia, while, for some interviewees, apathy, social detachment, and quietness have always been constitutive parts of Pavia, others reflect on how much the city has changed throughout the last decades. In the past, people were purportedly more committed to social relations and community-building. Pavia had more activities and opportunities to offer, and overall, it was a better place to live in. This frequent reflection on the good old times – e.g., *quando io ero giovane* [when I was young] gives us insights into a feeling of constant nostalgia. “Nothing can ever be like it was,” summarizes one interviewee: this nostalgia often refers to the city, but it is also found in regards to the shopkeeping activities, as many report to be struggling to make ends meet vis-a`-vis the city’s perceived decline alongside a loss of moral values that used to guide social interactions. Indeed, Pavia’s rich history and tradition also take a central place in the interviewees’ discourse: a city with a promising past and charming traditions whose continuity is now threatened. Our interviewees consider Pavia to be calm, although not as safe as it once was. Interestingly, criminality is almost solely linked to immigrants and youngsters, once again generalizing an ‘other’ through their villanization. An interviewee mentions that Pavia is still doing well if one looks at the integration of immigrants and overall safety, mostly because “there are not many [immigrants] yet because the people

who manage them understand that Pavia is a city that cannot take a lot of them and the few that come get integrated.” Nonetheless, immigrants of color are still at times referred to as *extracomunitari* – a somewhat derogatory term coined in the early 1990s to designate those coming from outside the European Union – with some being directly associated with laziness and criminality:

They are *mantenuti*, parasites. They live a good life of criminality without being stopped in this country while Italians are sinking, paying all of these taxes without seeing any return in the society we live in. We are here working like crazy and they [*questi*, literally “these ones”] have time to go strolling around the city. (Male shopkeeper, historical bar)

Whilst highlighting the presence of undesirable or undeserving newcomers, shopkeepers also notice how the city center has changed due to outward migration. Shopkeepers of Corso Garibaldi, in particular, portray a historical street, before vibrant, as being now empty and faded. Gentrification does not bring prosperity to small businesses either, as “cities are becoming less and less distinctive [...] and big chains and franchised businesses in their centers make them look more and more like each other.” At the same time, the city might appear emptier because, despite being a city of services with its university and hospital, people are leaving. “There are no reasons to stay here,” mentions one interviewee for whom emigration is intrinsic to Italy as a country, “I am thinking of leaving the country myself as my father once did.”

Shopkeepers and resentful affectivities in Mantova

In Mantova, the first impression is that the city is emptying from the core of the commercial activity. “So many shops are empty,” says the shopkeeper of a candy specialty shop, “people come here for a day trip, from bigger and more popular cities such as Verona or Milan, to see the art and architecture, and the city also promotes exhibitions and concerts, but people do not come here to spend money or do lots of shopping, [which is why] only restaurants and bars thrive in the city.” Shopkeepers in Mantova convey a general discontent regarding the current conditions of the city, especially those perceived as impacting their living: lack of parking spots and a strict policy of traffic red zones in some streets that renders shopping there “less comfortable”; increasing rental prices that make it impossible to live and make business in the city center if not “upon inheritance” or sustained by chain businesses with national or international prominence; and the nefarious effects of e-commerce to small businesses, some of them trying to adapt with the creation of websites, even if feeling that they cannot “keep up.

Although they see Mantova mostly as a provincial *paesone*, literally “extended village,” shopkeepers tend to recognize the unfulfilled potential of the city center, often

encapsulated in the recurring expression *la bella addormentata* [the sleeping beauty]. In addition to references to measures and changes that have affected their living, shopkeepers often observe the “lack of youngsters” in the city center, for which the practical reasons commonly advanced transpire discontent regarding the present circumstances: Mantova is presented as lacking opportunities and services, as its youth is confronted with the aforementioned rising rental prices; the transfer of key services, in which the highly skilled youth is trained to work, to the suburbs; and with the realization that only bigger cities nearby can provide opportunities to the improvement of personal circumstances. The lack of solutions has clear implications for the future of the city: “it is something we will have to live with, only a few stay,” “there are some young people, but the best of them go away,” “nobody wants to live as their grandfather did and take over the small family business, which gives more headache than money, or work the land after earning a university degree,” “now you see mostly older people [...] the city will un- avoidably wither if nothing changes [...] but I do not see what could be done.”

Discontent, accompanied by a particular sense of demographic helplessness, makes the issue of emigration especially salient to shopkeepers in Mantova’s city center. Still, the common impression is that, although Milan “offers an attractive job market” to the youth, the preferred destination is abroad as “Italy gives them no incentive to stay”: “half or more [of those who emigrate] go abroad ... Switzerland, Germany, Luxemburg, France but less, and others to the USA,” a move facilitated in present times by a “better command of foreign languages” among younger generations. In the conversation, when confronted with Mantova’s emigration rates, some interviewees would, however, see the need to introduce another layer to these “blind numbers,” which many believe may be inflated by “the Italian imbecile administration,” according to which “anyone with a drop of Italian blood can be considered Italian.” “Those statistics should be taken with prudence,” argued an elderly shopkeeper whose wife’s family had established the shop in the 1930s, “because they mix different demographic movements.”

A general feeling of distrust is overwhelmingly expressed at a national level. At the municipal level, on the contrary, shopkeepers seem openly satisfied: “we have a *bravo sindaco*,” meaning “a mayor who is a good guy,” was a recurrent impression, praising “how much the mayor has done for the city” and naming the renovation of buildings that “make the city more beautiful” and the rehabilitation of a public park seen as reviving community spirit. Distrust does manifest when referring to the state, national-level administration and political elites through statements such as “I do not trust a word they [politicians] say, nor the media, they only show you what they want you to see”; “there is no one with a political project, there are only slogans”; “we have a long line of corrupt politicians who have ruined this country”; “they only

care about their position and how they can profit from it, not about what they can do for the country and the people”; “there is no statesmanship or long-term vision, they think in terms of electoral cycles”; “Italy had all the conditions to be in a much better position, but we have terrible politicians who only look for personal gain” and “a ridiculously inefficient administration.” According to shopkeepers in Mantova, the system does not only have some faults; it is primarily rotten, as politicians are seen under the light of criminality and corruption or, at the very least, incompetence.

From the local and regional levels to the national, some interviewees brought up a clear sense of nostalgia. Nostalgia is evoked alongside claims of a decreasing sense of community, including among shopkeepers, with an association that, although existent, they see as offering little support. This sense is characterized by the longing for a ‘lost past’ when life was better or easier and the city more vibrant. Such longing often encompasses expressions of discontent with undertones of ethnic differentiation within the nation. Their city is in a region that shopkeepers feel was historically wronged in the development of a unified Italy, of which it was purportedly a loser: “Italy is too long of a peninsula that was turned into a country”; “North and South could not be more different”; “here we contribute more to the country than the South”; “how many times did we have to pay for the mistakes of the South? Too many!”; “historically everything worked so well in Lombardy.” The placing of the city within a region in relative decline (in opposition to a glorious past) that transpires from their discontent seems to mirror a broader Italian decline within a European context: “Italy had a leading position, we were at the forefront of industrial development,” said the co-owner of a fishery at Via Cavour, “now we are reduced to nothing in Europe; we do not even dictate our own destiny.” Some, like a shopkeeper in Piazza Erbe, blame the European Union for this: “the Euro, and the Union model as a whole, was created to favor Germany.”

However, this apparent decline is not directly connected to immigration, at least not as far as the city is concerned. All the interviewees considered Mantova a safe city, even if merely in comparison to bigger ones. Thus, there is still a clear link between immigration and criminality through an association between ‘safety’ and a ‘more homogeneous’ city, ethnically speaking. Immigration was regarded as either a big-city issue or as a problem at the national level, with immigrants allegedly increasing the pressure on public services, infrastructure, and welfare. Although the tendency overall was to blame an ‘inefficient’ administration or ‘incompetent’ politicians for the potential dangers posed by immigration – “in Italy, the problem is always the lack of planning, the Italian stupidity,” “immigrants do not have a big impact on

the country, but politicians use them to gain votes” – some interviewees held more extreme views:

I am not racist, you know, and I do not want to go too much into politics, but while we need immigrants, I cannot understand this – how should I put it? – *sostituzione* [replacement], let’s say [...] Why the government seems to do nothing to retain Italians and Europe wants so badly that we make space for everyone who comes knocking on our door [...] Of course, we should help those fleeing war [...] but if in your house you can only fit five people, are you really going to receive fifteen in good conscience, knowing that you cannot feed, clothe, and properly accommodate them? [her sister intervenes, in disagreement] I am not blaming those poor people, I am blaming the government! In the past ten or fifteen years it was open door, not caring if people had a place to sleep or an empty stomach – do you think that’s humanitarian or rather irresponsible? (Female shopkeeper, family-owned fabric store)

Although more extreme at their core, these notions illustrate a common perception connecting immigration and emigration: one (newcomers) cannot compensate the other (people leaving). On the contrary, they both are seen as part of a broader phenomenon with specific culprits, weakening or potentially destroying a community that is nostalgically fantasized in opposition to the present distrust and discontent.

Discussion and conclusion

Although portraying a somewhat shared experience of struggle, our interviewees in Pavia and Mantova “could not be said to be actively seeking to change their place in the world” (Wells & Watson, 2005, p. 262). Despite their claim to “avoid politics,” shopkeepers’ emotions of discontent, distrust, and nostalgia in the constellation of resentful affectivities against local- and national-level government inform their worldview and have the potential of being politicized and mobilized at different levels or extrapolated to broader phenomena and transnational entities and institutions.

While in Pavia government-related grievances were directed toward both local and national levels, in Mantova grievances are mostly circumscribed to the state, contrasting with an overall satisfaction with their local administration. Pavia, more of an immigrant-receiver city, and Mantova, more of an emigrant-sender city, both display place resentment, as the entirety of interviews reported feelings that their cities were disregarded and mistreated by political elites; that they did not receive a fair share or were contributing disproportionately to the state’s resources (often in terms of regional resentment); and that their best interests and values were somewhat disregarded. Place resentment becomes visible in commonly employed expressions by shopkeepers when asked to describe their city. The city of Pavia, with a wealthy

past of industry and thriving businesses, is described as a “dormitory” and a “city of services.” The city of Mantova, with a culturally and artistically rich past where tourism and businesses thrived, is described as a “sleeping beauty,” more of a *paesone* than a city.

Discontent was the predominant lens we identified in the discourse of shopkeepers in Pavia. This discontent was both self- and society-centered: shopkeepers in Pavia had a negative assessment of their situation, often emphasizing the personal resilience required to keep the doors of their business open amidst unfavorable circumstances, also pointing the finger at the local community. This discontent was predominantly formulated as a resentful affectivity against the local administration, which, according to the interviewees, contributed to the economic decline. However, discontent sometimes encompassed Italian society as a whole. In Mantova, discontent was less localized and often discursively intertwined with nostalgia, accompanying statements describing a perceived broader decline. Perceptions of territorial inequalities were much more central to discontent among shopkeepers in Mantova, who pointed to North–South national divisions and the place of Italy within the European Union. Both in Pavia and Mantova, discontent also strongly manifested in criticism toward the fiscal system allegedly depleting hard-working citizens with excessive and unfair taxation. Shopkeepers in the two cities believed that “they had it worse” than their parents, which seems to bring an overwhelming uncertainty regarding the future. From their discourse transpires a lack of confidence in their fellow citizens; the decreasing importance of all-encompassing ideologies leading to comprehensive narratives (Abts, 2015); a belief of loss of political power; and a decreasing sense of community concomitant to an increasing sense of socio-economic vulnerability. These markers of discontent (Steuer et al., 2017), providing the basis for an evaluative compass on the way democracy works (Norris, 2005; Akkerman et al., 2017), are significant for the normative expectations regarding the democratic process — i.e., what people may expect, as citizens, taxpayers, and members of local and national communities, from their elected representatives.

Distrust was the lens manifesting in the most similar way in both cities. In Pavia, it is still directed toward the local administration, although it often reflects a broader lack of trust in Italian institutions and a generalized suspicion toward political elites. As in Mantova, there is the impression that political elites not only act in their own interest but also take part in a broader agenda, including but not restricted to migration, that is “hidden” from the general public. Distrust, the predominant lens in Mantova, primarily concerns the central government and national elites, which integrate a political system that tends to be perceived as corrupt or, at the very least, “faulty.” In both cities, there is the general feeling among shopkeepers that politicians

at the national level want to take advantage of positions of power for their own gain. Where there was support for right-wing populist politicians, the idea was that “they cannot do worse” than their predecessors, for they at least seemed to have in consideration “what was best” for Italy and Italians. In the absence of what shopkeepers could deem as competent, trustworthy politicians, the value of democratic representativity is lacking, thus opening a crack in the legitimizing foundations of democratic processes and institutions. Distrust and discontent often appear intertwined, as discontent may be translated into distrust in manifestations of system dissatisfaction, and distrust often depends on discontent — a negative assessment of the present situation — to motivate the identification of problems, such as e- and im-migration, and culprits.

Nostalgia is more prevalent in Mantova, a city with a higher emigration rate: there is a sense of demographic helplessness — young people leaving — for which shopkeepers do not see a solution, political or otherwise. This aspect is in stark contrast with the discourse in Pavia, which attracts newcomers thanks to the university and the hospital, as well as study programs and jobs offered in these contexts. However, in Pavia, even when young people may be attracted by the university, the perception is that they are not encouraged to stay. Shopkeepers tend to place the absence of young Italians within broader globalized trends, ranging from free movement to e-commerce, that threaten not only the city, its culture, and local community, but also their trade. Human mobility is, thus, an ever-present element in their nostalgia: “before,” according to an imprecise chronology, “Italians” stayed, hence the city was more vibrant; “before” there were not as many immigrants, hence citizens felt safer. There is, therefore, a desirability scale among shopkeepers regarding immigrants, contrasting incoming foreigners to the idea that “the best Italians” (i.e., highly educated young adults) leave the city and the country.

The idea of an ethnically diverse Italian society has strong implications for the nostalgia voiced by shopkeepers. They feel that not only their city is being engulfed by bigger ones, thus losing its distinctiveness, but also that they are losing their own Italian-ness due to cities being deserted by their young nationals or flooded by newcomers (or both). Feelings of an alienating loss were often illustrated by recollections of a lived past of “what the city used to be.” However, the use of the past to make claims about the present has no delimited temporality: our interviewees often evoked different pasts, depending on what they wanted to criticize or whom they wanted to exclude. Thus, one can say that nostalgia is much more about the present than it is about the past: it is tied to change, to globalization and its effects on national democracy and the nation-state (Rodrik, 2011), leading to a growing concern regarding what politics is capable

of (Contreras et al., 2018; Bickerton et al., 2022) and the coherence of national, collective identities. Nostalgia can fuel discontent, as the perception of decline is often accompanied by a presumption that older generations lived more comfortably and/or an idealization of the past, as well as distrust, since nostalgia provides a critical frame to new phenomena and trends of globalization that are often perceived to be promoted by certain elites.

Racial and ethnic distinctions clearly matter in the formation of resentful affectivities: although most shopkeepers seemed concerned about how their views would be morally assessed — sometimes having the need to preamble their opinions to assure the interviewer that they were not racist and did not discriminate — they frequently referred to migrant populations according to their origins and ethnicity. In Pavia, in particular, the way they worded the origins of some immigrants — such as the use of *extracomunitari*, a word with a negative connotation, meaning those coming from outside the EU; or specific mentions to their country of origin, such as China, Pakistan, and Morocco — suggests an emphasis on perceived differences, often framed as threats to the shopkeepers' trade, the ethnic homogeneity they view positively, or security.

In both cities, there was a tendency to portray immigrants as a monolithic entity and migration as a uniform experience/phenomenon, especially regarding the populations perceived as less desirable, less deserving, or even less similar to the Italian *ethnie*. In Mantova, immigrants from Eastern European countries appear to be those with whom shopkeepers have the most direct interaction and whom they view most favorably — especially Eastern European women, praised for their contributions to society as caretakers of Italian elders. Eastern European immigrants are portrayed as closer to Italian culture and values compared to immigrants from the African continent. There is, thus, a clear hierarchy based on perceived cultural and ethnic proximity, shaped by shopkeepers' understanding of Italian culture and ethnicity; in other words, shopkeepers adopt a racialized frame in their immigration narratives.

In Pavia, this racialization is more explicit, with shopkeepers often identifying specific nationalities or religions as undesirable, undeserving, or even threatening. We hypothesize that the more overt racialization observed in Pavia (with specific nationalities and religions being often mentioned) may be linked to the higher number of immigrants in this urban context. In contrast, in Mantova, racialization is subtler. Immigrants — especially women — from European backgrounds (Eastern Europeans) are perceived as more “integrated” and non-threatening, while those from non-European backgrounds are often left unnamed but still positioned as “other.” This produces a desirability-deservingness scale that privileges perceived

similarity to Eastern Europeans. In both cases, non-European immigrants are viewed as threats — economically and culturally.

Although during the so-called “refugee crisis,” negative attitudes were displayed from below, local authorities, and right-wing movements in Italy toward asylum seekers (Dimitriadis et al., 2021), our interviews did not hint at any concrete impact of this crisis on present migration narratives. Nevertheless, the absent link between those events and the resentful affectivities that inform present migration narratives is not strong enough evidence to support findings sustaining that the crisis did not increase anti-immigration sentiments (Stockemer et al., 2020). However — and even if, in the rare instances where refugees were mentioned, it was considered that they should be granted protection and support — it can be said that the image of the refugee appears as an example of a deserving newcomer who should be prioritized over others. Thus, the less-deserving, less-desirable “other” is implicitly identified as an economically motivated, non-European migrant, perceived as coming in too high numbers, draining public resources, and as a potential threat to ethnic homogeneity and security.

Migration narratives influence normative expectations of democracy harbored by shopkeepers in the cities of Pavia and Mantova. Such expectations arise from personal notions of justice, prosperity, and representativity in local and national communities, with political elites being held responsible for the practical implementation of such values. Since both inward and outward migration present a challenge to the national state, the way this challenge is articulated into resentful affectivities by shopkeepers gives coherence to narratives that, although placing the blame on politicians and/or the local/national administration, emphasize who should be included and who should not. By distinguishing between desirable/deserving and undesirable/undeserving inhabitants, shopkeepers in the two cities give coherence to empty-crowded paradoxes. Emigration and immigration are, thus, articulated into resentful affectivities very much as the two sides of the same coin — the “best Italians” are leaving while less desirable/deserving foreigners are arriving — with shopkeepers attributing varying degrees of agency to this dual movement, which integrates or illustrates broader criticisms of the government and political elites, whether local or national. Ultimately, these notions of mobility connect immigration and emigration, not as counterbalancing each other, but rather through an overarching narrative according to which broader phenomena with specific culprits are weakening and may potentially destroy a community that is nostalgically fantasized in opposition to every present facet inspiring discontent and distrust.

Migration is known to be “a highly emotional topic, often used for political mobilization” (Schneider, 2020, p. 215). A subset of emotions, here proposed as lenses through

which resentful affectivities can be understood, is prolific in ascribing political meaning to both presence and absence, interweaving mobility with broader themes of burden-sharing; the preservation of local, regional, and national identities; a perceived political, social, economic, and ethno-demographic decline; and the attribution of blame to political elites who are deemed to have failed as representatives of those they govern. Although the shopkeepers' discourse tends to comprise several emotions, even if unevenly, the lenses we applied to it — discontent, distrust, and nostalgia — were meant to discern the main themes of active, potential, or latent resentment that we, grounded in historiography and theory, expected to find. Yet we did not want to take its active manifestations for granted nor be blinded to more passive expressions. While the concept of resentful affectivities has proven to be more inclusive than resentment in this task, the application of lenses pinpointed the emotions according to which inward and outward mobilities are articulated vis-à-vis urban contexts and normative expectations stemming from social notions of democracy.

Our contribution highlights the importance of unfulfilled expectations and their role in shaping resentful affectivities within narratives of immigration and emigration. Shopkeepers' normative imaginaries are deeply rooted in the past, and as such, they face considerable difficulties in reconciling these visions with present-day realities. Emotions such as discontent, distrust, and nostalgia stand in tension with the potential for imagining normative futures in the present. Discontent undermines the capacity to build community and fosters a sense of hopelessness; many shopkeepers express a lack of initiative in protecting long-standing local businesses, which they feel are neglected by politicians. The erosion of trust further hinders political engagement and collective organization. Shopkeepers lament the absence of community support yet simultaneously fail to mobilize efforts to create or participate in such a community. Nostalgia adds to a sense of inertia and hopelessness, leaving shopkeepers emotionally anchored to a perceived better past while feeling powerless in the present. Their discontent and lack of trust in politics extend to visions of economic redistribution: they do not trust politicians to enact meaningful change and view tax contributions as futile, believing that the state no longer represents their interests and acts with growing incompetence.

A recurrent theme when speaking of the country, the city, and outward and inward migration was the feeling that shopkeepers' interests (as urban inhabitants, as citizens and taxpayers, as a class, as Italians) were not being upheld by political elites: shopkeepers did not feel represented by those who were democratically elected to govern them. This expectation of representation, seemingly left unfulfilled, informs their adherence to particular (e-/im-)migration narratives, their moral judgment on the present status quo, and what they

perceive to be the desired social outcomes of democracy. Discontent, distrust, and nostalgia weave a colorful tapestry of resentful affectivities, which may turn into “politics of resentment” if shopkeepers mobilize, as they have in the past. We encourage a future agenda to further explore the link between the migration–emotions nexus and the (potential) politics of resentment, namely by looking at particular social groups with vested interests in exclusionary notions of space, identity, and fiscal citizenship, as these notions dialogue with and are negotiated within broader narratives known to impact voting behavior and political mobilization. Although the shopkeepers we interviewed seem uninterested in politics, their present withdrawal amidst a perceived crisis of representativity may make them more receptive to populist empowerment movements that tend to thrive amongst those self-proclaimed uninterested in politics in search of a vision reconciling globalizing phenomena and the nation-state.

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Empirical Article II

Resisting Societal Bordering through Political Subjectivity: Aboubakar Soumahoro's Activism in Italy

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Abstract

This paper analyses how societal and political borders perform processes of inclusion and exclusion. It does this in focusing on the process underlying the role categorizations play in migration narratives. These categorizations shape social and political outcomes, influencing migrants' opportunities to belong to the national community and access fundamental rights. Migrants, already positioned as outsiders, are often negatively categorized when portrayed as failing to meet normative expectations. Using the case of Aboubakar Soumahoro, the paper examines how migrant activism seeks to re-signify these categories, challenging dominant external representations. Such challenges can empower migrants by granting social and political visibility—a prerequisite for influencing migration discourse. However, they also risk reinforcing perceptions of migrants as lacking integration resources. From a democratic perspective, contesting exclusionary narratives may deepen marginalization, yet remains essential for addressing democratic injustices. This analysis highlights the ambivalent dynamics of categorization and the transformative potential of migrant political subjectivity.

Keywords

Societal bordering, categorizations, migrant activism, (in)visibilization

Introduction

For years, migration has been a key issue in public debates and political strategies in western countries. Beyond public policies on regulating migration flows or integrating immigrants, migration is widely discussed in the form of narratives. Migration narratives are stories developed through communicative practices that represent a specific view on migration, migrants or a country's migration history (Sahin-Mencutek, 2020). Narratives are regularly considered by policymakers and migration specialists as one of the most important determinants of public attitudes and behaviours towards migration (Dennison, 2021). Thus, social borders are reproduced through narratives. The latter are used to create, maintain, or dissolve these

borders by defining “Us” versus “Them,” inducing feelings of solidarity or exclusion, and hence legitimizing (or not) social boundaries that dictate access to resources, rights and social esteem. One of the most important components of narratives are categorizations. Social categorizations stem from a process that involves grouping individuals into categories — such as “Us” and “Them”— based on (supposed) common characteristics (such as age, gender, nationality, etc.) in order to structure and simplify the complex social reality that surrounds individuals. Their main function is to simplify the heterogeneity of a vast and chaotic social world into understandable, meaningful units, thereby enabling individuals to understand the behaviour or values of others and forge their identity.

This essay addresses how dominant categorizations affect migrants’ political subjectivity by focusing on the dynamic between the majoritarian categorizations of non-belonging minorities and the production of counter- categorizations by the members of such minorities, in this case migrants. We uncover this dynamic by analysing the case of migrant activist and politician Aboubakar Soumahoro. Born in Ivory Coast, Aboubakar Soumahoro arrived in Italy when he was 19 years old and started to work as a day laborer on farms. After graduating in sociology, he became a trade unionist and publicly denounced the living conditions of migrant day laborers. Soumahoro has progressively become a rare figure of the African diaspora to hold a high-level position in Italy, a fact demonstrated by his election in the Italian parliament. Soumahoro’s case study is paradigmatic of the role categorizations play in migration narratives and how they contribute to social and political outcomes that affect migrants’ opportunities to be part of the national community and, possibly, be protected in their fundamental rights and relational equality with the members of the national majority. Drawing from studies on processes of categorization and radical democratic theory (Mason, 1990; Modood, 1988; Schwiertz, 2021b, 2021a) we ask how marginalized groups can resist dominant categorizations and become societally and politically visible subjects.

A radical democratic perspective understands democracy as an open and conflictual process in which new political subjects emerge to challenge established orders of inclusion and exclusion (Balibar, 2004; Rancière, 2004). Such a process, in which a marginalized group claims an equal right to participation in shaping the collective order and acts of protest/resistance are perceived as manifestations of democracy’s core rather than disruptions to it, is illustrated by Soumahoro’s activism, which contests the societal borders that restrict both full belonging and political agency. We argue that by resisting externally imposed narratives, migrants are also faced with counter- narratives that aim to once again categorize them as problems void of political subjectivity. Indeed, through Soumahoro’s case study, we

show that the construction of a political subjectivity conflicts with migrants' social representations as non-belonging, and this can lead to their re-categorization, and further exclusion, by dominant narratives.

Our analysis consists in two parts. We first trace a process of construction of Soumahoro's narrative through the in-depth analysis of his manifesto, the book *Umanità in Rivolta: la nostra lotta per il lavoro e il diritto alla felicità*⁸ [Humanity in Revolt: our struggle for work and the right to happiness] and key events and speeches through his activist and political journey. The process of re-categorization is then studied by analysing narratives in articles published in Italian media outlets (La Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Giornale, and Il Manifesto) in the four weeks that followed the so-called "the Soumahoro case"⁹.

Narratives, Categorizations, and Bordering

The categorization process

The use of categories has been defined as unavoidable both in everyday interactions and in their analysis (Mason, 1990; Modood, 1988). However, not all categories are the same and perform the same effects. Jenkins (2000) distinguishes between self/group identification, which takes place among those inside a specific boundary, and categorization, which is a process of external definition (Jenkins, 2000). Through the latter process, categories can be imposed on or fit the self-designated ones (Rex et al., 1986). Categories create specific labels which have effects on the wider discursive context, for instance, in creating and reinforcing stereotypes, influencing interpretation of messages, and contributing to the discrimination and exclusion of the members of outgroups.

Research on categorization processes has delved into the usage of categories, their meaning and performative power. It has questioned the relationship between categorization and identity, namely the implications of a discrepancy between (supposed) descriptive categories and the identity of the members of the categorized group (Mason, 1990). Scholars underscore categorizations' consequential and performative nature, underlining their role in creating normative prescriptions on how social and political interactions should be organized (Jenkins, 2000; Mason, 1990; Modood, 1988).

The performative power of categorization depends, on the one hand, on the social and political power and social visibility of the actors that foster them (like the state, majority group, etc.) and, on the other, on the lack of power of those categorized to socially and politically resist

⁸ Soumahoro, A. (2019). *Umanità in rivolta: La nostra lotta per il lavoro e il diritto Alla felicità*. Feltrinelli.

⁹ A full list of the cited articles is available upon request.

externally imposed categories. Social visibility here refers to the extent to which certain actors, groups, and/or identities are recognized, represented, and acknowledged in the social sphere, i.e., how they are seen and counted as legitimate members of society, both literally and symbolically. Externally imposed categorization restricts opportunities for free and autonomous self-identification of vulnerable groups, reducing their voice in affirming their social identity. However, marginalized groups do not lack a voice because they are not capable of self-identification, but because they lack the resources to make their self-identification visible and publicly recognized. As recognition theorists assert, self-identification must be recognized by the external societal world to be effective and to lead to autonomy (Honneth, 1995; Young, 1990). The constitution of a recognized group identity needs fair conditions of voice, power, and emancipation to avoid misrecognition and oppression.

The categorization of migrants

Social and political categorizations result from narratives about how immigration affects societies and how it should be governed, the contents of what migrants' integration should be, and what a cohesive (or supposedly "authentic") national society is and should be. Migrants are thus narrated in receiving societies through categorizations based on the binary division between non-migrants (i.e. citizens who belong) and migrants, outsiders coming from beyond states' borders that are often perceived as culturally distant. Such categorizations hamper the recognition of their belonging to society (Brighenti, 2007), rendering them invisible as political subjects.

The construction of common belonging through narratives is often operationalized through the distinction of "Self/Us" versus "Other/Them", shaping a common or shared understanding of the past within a group, community, or society that formulates a socially constructed narrative reflecting the identity, culture, and values of a group (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012; Sahin-Mencutek, 2020). Such narratives perform and publicly legitimize symbolic forms of non-belonging as well as the material exclusions of migrants from civil or social rights, opportunities in the job market, freedom of movement, etcetera. In this sense, the narrative construction of (national) belonging has an "exclusionary potential" (Gianni, 2023). When migrants are socially represented as deviating from the dominant national norms and values, they are more likely to elicit threats and, consequently, to be devalued as a group (Kauff et al., 2015).

Through the aforementioned processes, individuals on the move are not only subjected to physical borders, whose crossing turns them into migrants, but also to social and symbolic borders that affect their public identity and agency in immigration countries. Societal bordering

theory explains how inter-group hierarchies are built and preserved in migration societies (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Migrant groups are often categorized as groups seen as belonging beyond rather than within the borders of the receiving society. Bordering is an instance of unilateral external categorization that dispossesses migrants of their agency, particular experiences, and common belonging. Indeed, social (non- physical) bordering contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of migrants' voices in the process of categorization of this group. However, as we show below, borders and closures are open to transformative processes that challenge, re-signify and de-institutionalize them (Benhabib, 2004).

Political Subjectivation and De-othering

Soumahoro's case study allows us to shed light on such social and political dynamics. Our reconstruction of the case starts in 2012, when Soumahoro played a crucial role in the European Sans-Papiers and Migrants march organized by the International Coalition for Sans-Papiers, Migrants and Refugees, of which he was one of the founders (Chimienti et al., 2013; Farolfi, 2012) The march, which mobilized migrants without regularized documents, was an attempt to show dissent towards nation-states' physical borders. Through the march, migrants enacted a narrative contesting the European system that marginalizes them, presenting themselves as subjects, protagonists of the march, highlighting they too can enjoy the right to move freely and that they are ready to fight for this right. Against what they perceived as stigmatization, marginalization, and oppression, the campaign fostered political subjectivation and collective worth through new means of self-identification. By political subjectivation we mean "a process through which "those who have no part" emerge as political subjects and demonstrate that they must be counted as a part of society, despite their differential exclusion" (Schwartz, 2021a: 400)

Soumahoro's journey and experience in Italy, together with the first years of activism, are narrated in his *Umanità in Rivolta*. In the book, Soumahoro outlines the process of bordering in Italian society, mentioning how migrants are considered to be beyond the borders of the country even when contributing to the country's economy. According to him, Italian society's indifference towards migrants' social invisibility strengthens the criminal groups that are exploiting migrants in vulnerable conditions. Soumahoro emphasizes the commonalities between migrants and Italian nationals regarding economic vulnerabilities. In attempting to give voice to the experience of exploited migrants discriminated against in Italian society, he shows that the former group shares the same condition as many Italian citizens, namely their exploitation as workforce (especially in the context of Southern Italian farms controlled by

mafia). Soumahoro thereby calls into question the social bordering of migrants. On the one hand, he gives voice to a specific history of discrimination and exploitation of non-White migrants; on the other, he reframes the dichotomy “Self/Us” versus “Other/Them” in showing that majoritarian and minority groups, despite being represented as being in opposition, share this form of exclusion. For him, the two groups do not oppose each other. Instead of their supposed antagonism, they share common struggles, and they are concerned by the same injustices.

Soumahoro’s narrative not only called into question the mainstream categorization of migrants, which portrays them as beyond the nation. It also underpinned Soumahoro’s activism. When he established an organization to combat exploitation in the agricultural sector, he mobilized those that were not considered political subjects (namely migrants), alongside those who were the (supposedly) legitimate political subjects (namely Italian citizens), who have voting and political rights. In contesting the external categorization of migrants, Soumahoro challenges both invisibility and the deprivation of rights, allegedly reserved for those who belong to the nation-state. In doing so, he becomes a political actor. This development created a tension between the external categorization of migrants (as non-belonging to and excluded from the national political community) and the self-identification of Soumahoro and the constituents of his collective as political subjects. This conflict of categorizations is produced by the refusal of Soumahoro (and more generally migrants) to stick to what their external categorization entails, namely their political invisibility and exclusion. In contesting exploitation in the agricultural sector, Soumahoro calls for the political agency of all people working in this sector, both migrants and citizens. The counter-narrative allowed marginalized migrants to potentially gain support and solidarity from the native population in the fight for their rights, and to acquire a political voice.

Re-categorization of racialized migrants in Italian society

In October 2022, Aoubakar Soumahoro was elected to the Italian Parliament, the only member of African descent among 400 deputies. As a member of Parliament, he declared his intention to be the spokesperson of the poor and marginalized, regardless of their colour and of their origins. His election represented a step forward in his political role. He initially emerged as a representative of non-White, undocumented, and exploited migrants. Then, as a representative of the exploited working class in the agricultural sector. Finally, he positioned himself as representing all individuals living in Italy and suffering from poverty. As in his previous activism, he fostered representation and political voice for the marginalized, foregrounding common goals between diverse marginalized groups and promoting migrants’

categorization as belonging to Italian society. Poverty, exploitation, and vulnerability are social conditions that both migrants and members of the national majority may share. Equated with poor and working-class Italians, migrants acquire additional societal and political subjectivation and visibility, despite other significant social, political and economic differences.

However, Soumahoro's narrative on the convergence of struggles between migrants and Italian vulnerable citizens was soon called into question by a process of migrants' re-categorization, in which the differences between migrants and nationals (in cultural, political, and economic terms), once again were to be seen as much more relevant than the similarities existing in their economic exploitation.

In November 2022, a scandal affected Soumahoro's political standing. Two cooperatives providing services to migrants and run by Soumahoro's mother-in-law reported irregularities: migrant workers had not been paid for two years, were given accommodation without water and electricity, and had been forced to sign fake invoices. The scandal, reported by the media as "Soumahoro's Case" [Il Caso Soumahoro], involved the activist and politician's wife and mother-in-law, who came under investigation in December 2022. It is important to underline that Soumahoro was never under investigation and was formally declared innocent by Latina's district attorney's office in April 2023. Nevertheless, the scandal gave Soumahoro a strong negative visibility in Italian media.

In the most widely read newspapers in the country, the mainstream media narrative of "Soumahoro's Case" underlined the following aspects: First, the impossibility for Soumahoro to be innocent or uninformed of the irregularities (Cappellini, 2022; Carugati, 2022; Di Vito, 2022; Sablone, 2022) Second, the cruelty and ruthlessness of a man, his family, and other non-White migrants allegedly involved in the irregularities, who did not hesitate to take advantage of the deprived and of people with whom they have shared much and who have lived their same struggles (Galici, 2022; Garau, 2022; Leonardi, 2022; Sablone, 2022; Zurlo, 2022). Third, Soumahoro's and his family's luxurious lifestyle – as evidenced by the activist and politician's house, his wife's brand clothes and accessories, and pictures posted by them on social media (Curridori, 2022; La Stampa, 2022; Leardi, 2022; Leonardi, 2022; Pistilli, 2022). The mainstream media narrative illustrates how societal bordering operates through moral discourses in the public sphere, as deviation from expected migrant behaviour triggers renewed exclusion.

Soumahoro responded to the accusations in the Italian mainstream media narrative and to his colleagues' silence by reiterating his innocence and suspending himself from the parliamentary group. This self-suspension expressed a voluntary exclusion from the very

system that aimed to preserve its societal border and thus exclude him – and his migrant peers – from belonging, status and rights. Soumahoro’s response consisted mainly of three elements. First, the reiteration of his innocence. He opposed the categorization that portrays him as a deceptive criminal. Second, through his self-suspension from the political group he belonged to in the Parliament – which did not support him actively during the mediatization of the scandal – he affirmed his power to act independently as a member of the Parliament. Finally, in reiterating his confidence in the Italian judiciary system, he enacted a process of de-othering by expressing loyalty to the institutions of the society to which he belongs.

Although the formal case against Soumahoro was rapidly closed by the investigation conducted by the Latina district attorney’s office, we argue that it has contributed to the re-categorization of non-White migrants, even the ones not directly involved in the trial, as criminal, deceptive, ruthless and as incapable of integrating into the nation.

Concerning Soumahoro, the activation of the criminality trope can be understandable given that his family members were involved in criminal activities. However, it is plausible to think that for Soumahoro, the public judgement he faced was harsher than for similar cases involving white Italian politicians. The principle of presumption of innocence, a stronghold of Italian penal law, often put forward to calm the public controversies raised by the behaviour of Italian politicians, was not effectively mobilized for Soumahoro ¹⁰.

In more general terms, what emerged from the public narratives devoted to the case was not only the stigmatization of Soumahoro's action and political ambitions, but also the (re)deployment of the framing of migrants as criminals and untrustworthy. Such a re-categorization can be understood as a re-enactment of societal bordering by mainstream media outlets, prominent politicians and public opinion, according to which the non- White migrant is represented as deceptive, having a propensity for criminal acts, not loyal, not fitting the moral values of the nation, and thus undeserving to be part of the receiving society. Such representations were intensified by the fact that the victims of the fraud were the migrants that Soumahoro should represent and, politically and humanly, take care of. Migrants are untrustworthy to the point that they deceive other migrants, their peers. Ultimately, such a portrayal underlines the inhumanity of the successful migrant exploiting the deprived and disadvantaged individuals with neither political voice nor social capital to oppose their condition. These categories, building up a narrative of the “generalized” migrant, are not simply

¹⁰ Data shows that, in the current Italian parliament, 40 elected representatives, including deputies and senators, still have pending legal cases. See Guelfi, N. (2022, November 2). Condannati e indagati nel nuovo Parlamento: 40 eletti, tra deputati e senatori, hanno ancora pendenze con la giustizia. *La stampa*.

reactive inventions, but part of the persistent xenophobic structure of Italian society, the one Soumahoro's political action aimed to challenge.

Resisting categorizations and societal bordering: a democratic perspective

We have shown that Soumahoro's activism and narrative strategy called into question the dichotomy of "Us" versus "Them" that structures the main narrative of migrants in Italian society. To contest such a dichotomy, Soumahoro argued that the struggle against exploitation overcome it, creating commonalities between migrants and poor Italian citizens. Through his activism, he enacted a narrative that re-categorized non-white migrants as political subjects unified in their interests with other members of the non-migrant working class. Such a counter-narrative enables an alternative group self-identification and advances the claim that the social integration of the group needs political representation and participation. The analysis is summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Soumahoro case study

Concept	Definition	In Soumahoro's case study
Categorization	Labelling that defines social identities (Categorization versus self-identification)	Soumahoro is categorized as "migrant" in the receiving society.
Societal bordering	Processes that symbolically and discursively separate "us" and "them," defining who belongs without enquiring who is considered as non-belonging.	Soumahoro is categorized as "migrant" and, moreover, as non-citizen, his agency and experiences are not taken into consideration.
Political subjectivation	The emergence of excluded actors as political subjects claiming equality.	Soumahoro's activism asserts political agency.
Re-categorization	Backlash that redefines the resistant subject as deviant or illegitimate.	Media scandal reframes Soumahoro as deceptive and criminal
Radical democratic contestation	Conflictual moment exposing the limits of democratic inclusion.	Reveals how democracy is tested and redefined through struggle.

What lessons can be drawn from Soumahoro's case study? First, political subjectivity and agency of migrants inevitably conflict with the societal bordering that excludes them from society and politics. Second, migrants are re-categorized when they gain political visibility and claim better recognition or full belonging. Their political voice is framed as incompatible with what their social condition is assumed to entail, namely political invisibility or loyalty (Hirschman, 1974) – for instance, in avoiding complaint – to the society in which they have (supposedly) chosen to live. Third, although migrants' activism aims at contesting categorizations and social bordering, it is not sufficient to transform and re-signify the narratives that marginalize them. The imbalance of power makes resisting and subverting categorization difficult to achieve. The acquisition of an empowered form of political subjectivation is undoubtedly an important democratic resource for them and, more broadly, for democracy. However, the case shows that the political activism of the marginalized and categorized inevitably triggers a re-categorization by (almost) the same narratives they tried to contest or attempted to re-signify, reaffirming the performative effects of the societal borders that hamper their full belonging. Thus, migrants' resistance and political activism can lead to further exclusion, as the performative power of external categorization can distract attention or discredit the claims raised by migrants and re-establish the borders that marginalize them.

Over the last 30 years, political philosophers have extensively explored the question of how liberal states' policies and values can contribute to the exclusion of migrants in receiving societies (Benhabib, 2004; Cole, 2000). Soumahoro's case study shows that categorizations play a central role in how such exclusions are performed. According to a radical conception of democracy such a relational dynamic seems to be unavoidable. Exclusions and political conflicts are an immanent aspect of the political. To challenge their condition of non-belonging, the members of marginalized groups are put in the condition of having to overcome the symbolic and material borders enforced by categorizations that contribute to excluding them. The main performative effect of societal external categorizations and their bordering logic is to deny agency, subjectivity, and voice to the categorized. However, according to radical democratic theorists, every individual is capable of political subjectivation. Individuals belonging to marginalized groups are key actors of regime contestation and change (Balibar, 2004; Rancière, 2004). Indeed, the very existence of marginalized groups opens space for alternative perspectives and resulting contestation of the dominant order. In this perspective, gaining political agency and social visibility are democratic conditions for migrants to contest the dominant categorizations regarding who legitimately belongs to society and who does not and, consequently, to increase their societal inclusion.

Soumahoro's case study illustrates that political subjectivity comes into being through this process: positive self-identification, an empowered collective political agency, and promotion of societal de-othering. The affirmation of a political subjectivity triggers reactions, as the re-categorization of non-White migrants by mainstream narratives (and then the dialectic continues). Such political conflicts, despite being mainly presented negatively by the majority group as disrupting and threatening the democratic order, are an unavoidable ontological element of a democratic system, especially those marked by deep structural injustices. The development of political subjectivity, understood here as political identity and agency, is a necessary condition for migrants to challenge the injustices affecting them. Becoming political subjects, migrants can engage in a conflicting process of counter-categorizations and thus contest the social imaginaries on belonging that deny them recognition and equal standing in society and politics (Brighenti, 2007). Such a transformative process entails that migrants become not only a visible and socially recognized part of society, but also a political subject participating in, and having a voice about, the transformation of the narratives that symbolically and materially hampers their becoming full members of society.

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Empirical Article III

Distrusting ‘them’ and creating ‘us’: migration and the uses of the past by populist radical right parties in southern Europe

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Abstract

Migration is a central topic in the populist radical right (PRR) discourse, usually perceived within the frames of the politicization of immigration in Europe. Departing from the centrality of distrust in such discourse, we advance the argument that PRR parties strategically use nostalgic narratives to make assertions on both inward and outward migration as an elite-blaming strategy, thus mobilizing paradoxes – presence-absence, crowded-empty, deserving-undeserving – through a sentimental longing for a better past. Italy, Spain, and Portugal have long been countries of *emigration* that, in the last few decades, have become countries of *immigration*, too. In Italy, a populist radical right party (*Fratelli d'Italia*) is in government, and Spain and Portugal, not long ago regarded as exceptions in Europe's populist radical right sweep, have seen a rapid mainstreaming and growth of these movements (*Vox* and *Chega*), now consolidated as third-biggest parties in terms of parliamentary representation. By analyzing party manifestos of recent general elections (2022, 2023, and 2024), we shall posit that the populist radical right discourse in Southern Europe layers ideas of overlapping, protracted crises threatening the future of the nation and its people against the backdrop of a glorified past that unifies a ‘virtuous’ population. Nostalgia conveys distrust channeled towards specific actors, thus creating an intelligible discursive framework for grievances and their populist radical right rationale. Mobility takes a central place in the politics of nostalgia, as particular e-/im-migration narratives emerge vis-à-vis *ethnonational* concerns emphasizing a widening gap between a hopeful past and a woeful present.

Keywords

Nostalgia, distrust, populist radical right (PRR) parties, migration, party manifestos

Introduction

Populism—defined as one of the key threats to democracy by much scholarship since the early 2000s—has held experts increasingly concerned (Canovan, 2002; Ardit, 2004; Albertazzi and

McDonnell, 2008; Abts and Rummens, 2007). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, studies looking at globalization and its crises showed how these phenomena had contributed to the development of a feeling of constant insecurity, suspicion towards change, and a perception of the incapability of the nation-state to protect its citizens from crises (Tuathail, 1999): it is in this context that populist politicians capitalized on people's fears and anxieties to gain power by selling specific promises. In addition, research in the early 2000s started investigating what was to become a crucial object of study in populist discourse today: the use of distrust and the meaning and significance of trust in populist arguments (Hameleers, 2020; Bonikowski, 2016; Farrand and Carrapico, 2021; Fieschi and Heywood, 2004). The sentiment of distrust has been instrumentalized by populist discourse towards elites at the national and supranational levels (Farrand and Carrapico, 2021; Hameleers, 2020; Grigoriadis, 2020). At the supranational level, distrust in populist discourse has mostly been directed towards EU technocratic elites (Reiser and Hebenstreit, 2020; Csehi and Zgut, 2021; Sata, 2023) despite research showing that populism and technocracy have often more in common than we might believe, given their complementary critique of party democracy (Bickerton and Accetti, 2017: 188).

Research has also investigated populist discourse of distrust towards specific societal groups. Many studies investigate the discursive hostility towards the press, experts, and scientists, who, according to this discourse, are devoted to knowledge and expertise rather than committing to the people's interests and sentiments (Carnegie et al., 2024; Martinico and Monti, 2024; Imran and Javed, 2024). Distrust might also be expressed towards specific societal groups who may not always be a political group, such as religious minorities and foreigners—migrants from specific backgrounds—encouraging specific attitudes towards these minorities (Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023; Campani, 2018; Nowicka, 2018; Kamenova and Pingaud, 2017). Right-wing populism and ethnonationalism have, in fact, often been linked and associated with one another: the reference to we, the people in right-wing populist discourse implicitly excludes part of the population, namely those belonging to racial, ethnic, or religious minorities (Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011; Varshney, 2021). Research has thus brought evidence of distrust as a powerful, dominant emotion found in populist discourse; and its strategic appeal in political discourse seems to concern social scientists. In fact, the debate on populism as a threat to democracy has become increasingly central to studies in political science, political philosophy, and sociology, with populism often being associated with a crisis of democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Havlík 2016; Weyland 2020; Akkerman et al., 2014): Spittler (2018) reported evidence showing that right-

wing populist parties do have a negative effect on democratic quality when they gain power and form governments.

In this article, we investigate the use of distrust in Southern European populist radical right (PRR) discourses, emphasizing similarities and differences and identifying a specific discursive strategy, answering the research question: how is the emotion of distrust strategically used in discourse by Southern European PRR parties? We advance the argument that the PRR parties utilize a specific strategy of nostalgic discourse aimed at conveying and reinforcing distrust. It is through a discourse in which nostalgia is a central emotion—a longing for a morally superior past (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022)—that PRR parties justify a strong feeling of distrust towards (a) national and regional elites; (b) supranational ideologies, entities, and organizations (e.g., the European Union); and (c) societal groups or individuals considered alien to the nationals (non-nationals/non-citizens). The predominant use of nostalgia in the discourse is an extremely powerful tool for inciting distrust towards the present and specific parts of present society. The PRR parties provide a straightforward solution to a rotting society by rationalizing securitization in the face of mobility. Security is introduced in the discourse as the solution to a distrustful society, not only by tightening border control but also by legitimizing othering processes in order to preserve a notion of we, the people. The strategic use of nostalgia often focuses on this exclusionary notion; on the one hand, it restricts who belongs to the people and, on the other hand, it stretches the meaning of national belonging in the present to an ancestral belonging that evokes a historical, often selective or even fantasized past. The identification of mobility, either as immigration or emigration, as an issue by PRR parties and its inclusion in a nostalgic repertoire emanating distrust is, we argue, a key feature of Southern European PRR parties in their attempt to ideologically reconcile long histories of emigration with pronounced, albeit recent, trends of increasing migrant populations. The uses of nostalgia are multifaceted, but we argue that mobility, in particular, is regarded by PRR parties through these lenses, as nostalgia allows them to further distrust by contrasting past and present in a discourse aimed at identifying culprits for national decline and insecurity. Furthermore, the PRR parties' nostalgic discourse is certainly in tune with the European Zeitgeist, as 67% of the European public thinks that the world used to be a better place (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2018). Comparing Lega, Fratelli d'Italia [FdI], Chega [CH], and Vox offers valuable insight into how populist radical right (PRR) parties in Southern Europe mobilize distrust of elites and institutions alongside nostalgia for idealized national pasts. While sharing core PRR traits (Mudde, 2007), these parties differ in how they evoke historical memory—post-fascism in Italy, authoritarian conservatism in Portugal, Francoism in Spain—reflecting distinct national narratives (Innerarity and Giansante, 2025) through the

same emotions. Their rise amid economic insecurity and political disillusionment (Pappas and Kriesi, 2015) makes them ideal for analyzing how distrust and nostalgia reinforce PRR appeal in comparable yet varied contexts (Table 1).¹¹

Table 1. Founding Dates, Electoral Breakthroughs, and Recent Performance of PRR parties in Southern Europe

Party	Date of creation	Parliamentary representation	Vote % in the last legislative elections
Lega	2017 [as the sister party of Lega Nord, established in 1991]	2018	8,77%
Fratelli d'Italia	2012	2022	26,00%
Chega	2019	2019	18,07% [2024] ¹²
Vox	2013	2019	12,38%

By looking at two key emotions—nostalgia and distrust—through which PRR parties propose readings of mobility-connected issues, we aim to analyze how these emotions are deployed and clarify their discursive implications in four political manifestos, thus identifying their tendencies and affinities at national (Italy, Portugal, Spain) and transnational (Southern Europe) levels. The shared history and current status of emigration countries that are, nevertheless, deeply concerned with immigration (Grignoli et al., 2024; Lama et al., 2025;

¹¹ Greece is excluded due to its distinct political trajectory, where distrust and nostalgia have primarily fueled left-wing populism rather than a sustained PRR presence (Pappas, 2013). Unlike Italy, Spain, and Portugal, Greek nostalgia often evokes resistance or victimhood narratives rooted in Balkan and Orthodox traditions, not authoritarian nationalism (Mazower, 2000). Additionally, Greece's extreme economic collapse and prolonged IMF oversight created a unique crisis context (Featherstone, 2011), making direct comparison with these Southern European PRR parties – where nostalgia revives national strength and distrust tends to target democratic elites and institutions – potentially less analytically coherent.

¹² The elected government in Portugal (2024) unexpectedly collapsed in March 2025, which led to a new election on 18 May 2025. Here, we refer to the election of 10 March 2024 and subsequently analyze Chega's 2024 manifesto. At the time of writing, the four MPs elected by those voting abroad are yet to be known, which will decide whether CH becomes the second biggest party in parliament. According to our present knowledge, the party obtained 22,56% of the votes (58 MPs), very close to the 23,38% received by the Socialist Party (PS), also with 58 MPs elected.

Zerka, 2019) make the choice of these three countries particularly relevant. In addition, what makes the study of these countries' PRR parties pertinent and urgently needed is their effective capability of networking and drawing inspiration from one another to gain visibility and, ultimately, electoral success; for example, the leader of FdI and the one of CH have delivered speeches at Vox's rallies on numerous occasions, even if only CH is part of the Identity and Democracy political group at the European Parliament (with Lega). Their stance on mobility usually identifies a common overarching narrative on migration and blame-shifting, but, even if the villains are usually the same, there are relevant variations in what is picked from the repertoire, a selection stemming from the workings of nostalgia when adopting context-dependent historical scripts.

Populism, nostalgia, and distrust: a theoretical framework

Despite the overall agreement on populism as a 'quintessentially contested concept' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 2–5), some guidelines are advanced by scholarship allowing for its identification: populism is generally perceived as a worldview (Müller, 2017) or a communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) according to which there is an ongoing struggle between 'corrupt elites' and 'the noble people'; a definition that points, therefore, to its anti-elitism and people-centrism (Mudde, 2004). Although the populist phenomenon may occur across the political spectrum (Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), we will focus here on a radical right type of populism as 'political claims-making predicated on a moral opposition between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter viewed as the only legitimate source of political power' (Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023: 182).

The worldview supported by the populist radical right relies, therefore, on the core assumption that democracy—and more concretely, democratic representation—has gone through a process of distortion, proposing alternative ways of doing politics that would be, according to their proponents, morally better and more consistent with democratic ideals (Chatterjee, 2020: 120–1). The populist rhetoric has thus been associated with feelings of political discontent (Rooduijn et al., 2016), protest attitudes (Schumacher and Rooduijn, 2013), conspiracy beliefs (Erisen et al., 2021; Van Prooijen et al., 2022), and ontological insecurity (Kinnvall, 2018). Furthermore, according to Webber (2023: 862–6), there are common tendencies and affinities stemming from the core elements—anti-elitism and people-centrism—of the populist radical right worldview: (i) a 'narrow and exclusive definition of the people' that often follows (ii) ascriptive characteristics (promoting racism, religious intolerance, rejection of cultural diversity, etc.); (iii) opposition to immigration; (iv) a skeptical view of professional experience, science, and education; (v) a 'sense of wounded dignity, victimhood, disrespect, or

vulnerability'; (vi) 'manipulative,' 'duplicitous' appeals; (vii) nationalist politics; (viii) illiberality; (ix) executive-dominated government; (x) economic grievance; (xi) rural bedrock.

In the literature on populism, Italy is frequently taken as a case study, 'a showcase' of these parties, given that populists have had a more durable hold on government (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2016; Caiani and Graziano, 2016). For this reason, there has been a burgeoning literature on the continuities and changes observed in Italian populist right-wing parties, their discourse and ideology, in the past few years (Puleo and Piccolino, 2022; Alekseenkova, 2022), thus paving the way for a variety of approaches (Ozzano, 2021; Di Matteo and Mariotti, 2021) and comparative studies, namely with other Southern European/Mediterranean countries (Marcos-Marne and Sendra, 2024; Chrysosgelos et al., 2023). Spain and Portugal have also seen an upsurge in academic interest after a long-lasting perception of the Iberian countries as exceptions in the European political landscape (Quintas da Silva, 2018; da Silva and Salgado, 2018; Vázquez-Barrio, 2021; Enríquez, 2017), overturned by the emergence of Vox and CH (Dennison and Mendes, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019; Küppers, 2024).

Some studies have underlined common features regarding the main drivers of right-wing populism intensity in these three countries, such as the exacerbation of the economic situation and destabilization of the political system after the 2008 financial crisis (Ruzza, 2018), precarity and financial/work insecurity (Zhirnov et al., 2024), long-term cultural change (Manunta et al., 2022; Baro and Jenssen, 2024), and immigration (Mora Castro, 2023), as well as national differences between PRR parties (Heyne and Manucci, 2021; Chamusca, 2024; Biscaia and Salgado, 2022). Recent works have further specified national differences regarding these parties' rhetoric: Vox's focus on state unity and mobilization of anti-feminist sentiment (Heyne and Manucci, 2021); CH's rising support stemming from an ability to articulate the discontent of marginalized rural areas (Magalhães and Cancela, 2025), even within a national context typically characterized by 'apparent social calm' and a relative absence of organized public dissent (Chamusca, 2024: 2); and Italy's FdI, extremely successful in presenting itself as a novelty within the context of radical right populism, and Lega, with its history of separatism, and their obsession with immigration and national security (Donà, 2022).

Despite the overall anti-establishment message and binary worldview, some authors have shown the adaptability of PRR parties when claiming the defense of a national heritage against immigrants and globalists: they are influenced by contextual factors as well as host ideologies (Fernández-García and Valencia-Sáiz, 2023), often tailoring the common features of populism to a specific national context (Biscaia and Salgado, 2022) to adapt to voters' preferences (Michel, 2020). Therefore, considering the discursive features of PRR parties in

Southern Europe specifically can, on the one hand, highlight the role of national characteristics for the flourishing of these parties in a political scene that had until recently been inauspicious (Valentim, 2024); and, on the other hand, shed light on a broader Southern European program of democratic regeneration in the face of a perceived crisis of representation (Luengo and Fernández-García, 2019), reinforcing economic and cultural grievances within the broader European context.

Distrust and nostalgia can be identified as emotional pillars as well as discursive lenses through which PRR parties make claims and build a political program. Firstly, anti-elitism constitutes in itself a deep-rooted, targeted distrust towards powerful elites and other ‘elite-like groups’ seen as capable of influencing politics and society (Springer and Ege, 2023). Distrust has been commonly understood as a feeling of unease and suspicion towards politics (Korvela and Vento, 2023), or the perception that the political system will act maliciously rather than beneficially (Newton, 2007: 344), thus expressing a lack of trust toward the political system in its entirety or components (Devine et al., 2020; Bunting et al., 2021). Although the concept of elite may be discursively malleable, it usually focuses on politicians as self-interested actors with a personal agenda (Bøggild, 2020), under a general ‘belief that political actors behave in a way that violates the shared moral norms of fairness and justice’ (Bertsou, 2019: 11). Secondly, the populist calls to action to those included in a particular (‘narrow’ and ‘exclusive’) definition of the people tend to draw ‘a comparison between a currently corrupt political system and a much better, glorious past’ (Van Prooijen et al., 2022: 952). Nostalgia is defined as the longing for a ‘glorious era’ that a construed ‘everyone’ can rally around (Elçi, 2022; Routledge et al., 2008); and, in the populist discourse, this ‘everyone’ transpires from a notion of the people as an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2005), i.e., a hegemonic representative of a collection of unsatisfied demands in the construction of a popular identity presupposing exclusion (Laclau, 2000). Societies dealing with aging populations, mass immigration, and economic setbacks are argued to be particularly susceptible to a collective nostalgia (Campanella and Dassù, 2019) that attributes to the past a sort of moral superiority (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2022) against perceived collective threats to national identity (Lammers, 2023) and ominous feelings of loss and decline (Gaston and Hilhorst, 2018). It is not surprising, thus, that the literature has suggested links between nostalgia, nativist narratives (Kešić et al., 2022; Bertossi et al., 2022), and populism (Van Prooijen et al., 2022; Frischlich et al., 2023; Couperus et al., 2023; Insero, 2022).

The uses of a narrative framework by PRR parties, we argue, tend to reinforce and dialogue with feelings of distrust. PRR parties identify current culprits for the loss of a former

glory and call a virtuous people to, under the party’s guidance, save society from the moral decline brought about by the ‘globalizing’ agendas and ‘woke’ ideologies supported by national and/or supranational elites. Therefore, only the party can provide a return to the better times people long for, thus fulfilling a national destiny. Through nostalgia, populists tell a story of how trust was lost—and make programmatic claims on how they will reconstitute it to the people.

Methods of data collection and analysis

In order to detect the uses of nostalgia to convey distrust in the statements of PRR parties in Southern Europe, we analyzed party manifestos for each country’s latest general elections (2022, 2023, and 2024), retrieved from the websites of Fratelli d’Italia, Lega Nord, Vox, and Chega. In these manifestos, we identified discourses referring to feelings of distrust as (i) unease and suspicion towards political elites, institutions, and/or specific societal groups (Korvela and Vento, 2023) and (ii) the people’s perception that the political system will act maliciously rather than beneficially (Newton, 2007: 344). After a preliminary survey of the documents, we hypothesize a link between distrust and nostalgia, which we detected as being particularly dominant on issues connected to mobility—here encompassing both emigration and immigration.

To identify how nostalgia and distrust are discursively linked to mobility, we need to primarily look for and analyze these emotions. We conceptualize nostalgia as the longing for a more prosperous, predictable, socially homogeneous (rethinking of the) past. Nostalgia points to a sense of decline and an irreversible loss of a past, one that is often fantasized as a golden age. As a result, a society that was supposedly thriving in the past is seen as undergoing major, nefarious changes in the present (nostalgia), a phenomenon for which there are, according to the PRR discourse, specific culprits (distrust).

The explicit terms of distrust or lack of trust tend to indicate a broadly shared feeling, expressing how the people these parties claim to represent (should) feel. Terms and themes that, we argue, indicate distrust point to the incapability, corruption, laziness, and disinterest in, or negligence of, the people’s best interests. We identified the feeling of nostalgia when finding terms that refer to the beauty, might, and values of the past, focusing specifically on nostalgic narratives of mobility conveying distrust. Table 2 summarizes our operationalization:

Table 2. Operationalization of Distrust and Nostalgia in the PRR Discourse

[Political] Distrust	Terms referring to elites at the regional, national and/or supranational levels: • Incompetence/incapability;
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	• Ignorance of what is good for the country and its citizens; • Disinterest and neglect towards the people/citizens; • Laziness and corruption; • Supporting of extreme left dangerous ideologies (<i>wokeism</i>).
Nostalgia	Terms referring to: • Richness of country's history, traditions, arts and culture (to be preserved); • Focus on a 'glorious, morally superior past' as opposed to a 'decadent present'; • More specifically the past was (a) homogenous, (b) more prosperous and powerful, (c) more stable and predictable, (d) safer, and, (e) consequently, allowing for a notion of true freedom (stemming from financial prosperity).

The *Rinascimento* Italy deserves: grand promises to relieve the *bel paese*

Within the Italian case, we investigate the narratives of Lega Nord, currently Lega, and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). These two parties represent the most prominent PRR parties in the country and, considering the results of the last Italian elections in 2022, the most relevant PRR parties in our region of interest, Southern Europe. Indeed, in the last elections, the center-right pursued a specific strategy—as opposed to the center-left—by presenting itself united, with Meloni's FdI, Matteo Salvini's Lega, and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia sharing an electoral platform. Electoral rules privileged the larger coalition; nevertheless, it was FdI that won the orchestrated internal race, gaining almost 22 percentage points, while Lega and Forza Italia lost 8.6 and 5.9 percentage points, respectively, considering their results in 2018 (Puleo et al., 2024). FdI successfully managed to present itself as a novelty in the context of the populist radical right, contrasting with a Lega still holding to a tradition of strong regionalism. FdI is considered a nativist party, conceiving the Italian national identity as the expression of a single, homogeneous Italian community sharing a common history, specific cultural heritage, and traditional values (Donà, 2022). On the other hand, Lega is rightly defined in several studies not only as a PRR party but also as a regionalist one (Newth, 2019); while presenting all of the characteristics of a PRR party, Lega came into existence with a specific separatist goal that was progressively de-radicalized while maintaining a focus on the autonomy of regions and municipalities. Research has, in fact, highlighted how, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, Lega distanced itself from its early separatist purposes through a process of ideological rethinking that placed

the defense of the nation, its values, culture, and interests at the center of its discourse (Albertazzi et al., 2018). Both parties can thus today be defined as part of the European PRR constellation.

In these parties' manifestos, we identify distrust towards national political elites, with specific hostility towards the left (generalized as *la sinistra*), which cannot be trusted due to 'the damages it has brought to the country' and the incompetence its governments have demonstrated throughout the years. *La sinistra* is described as incompetent, disinterested, and detached from the struggles of the average Italian citizen. *La sinistra* has radicalized society and promoted specific 'radical' and 'dangerous' ideologies. It is also accused of 'Europeanizing' the objectives and needs of the country, giving up sovereignty to a supranational entity, such as the European Union, and its elites. Both parties express concerns about the erosion of Italian sovereignty: the European Union is mainly seen as an enemy regarding environmental policy demands and the lack of cooperation in migration governance. Terms related to distrust are also directed towards minorities and, within minorities, the people these manifestos refer to as 'immigrants.' It is important to underline that the 'immigrants' these manifestos refer to are people on the move from Africa and the Middle East—people who mostly travel through Italy's southernmost border, Lampedusa, Sicily, and the central Mediterranean. Although these are clearly not the only people on the move towards/in Italy, these are the ones these manifestos focus on—which is indicative of these parties' understanding of 'migration.' In addition, the term 'immigrant' is often used to indicate those who are 'different,' the 'Other,' phenotypically, ethnically, and frequently religiously, glossing over the fact that many of these 'immigrants' might also be Italian citizens. The term 'immigrant' is then instrumentalized to indicate the 'Other in more general terms': everything and everyone not aligning with these parties' construction of Italian identity. Inward movement—immigration—is often reported in relation to social problems and disruptions in the country, such as claimed 'increasing criminality,' 'terrorism' and, in the specific case of Lega, the 'increasing power of the Nigerian mafia.' While immigration is generally perceived as something strictly negative and disruptive, both manifestos report instances of what can be defined as acceptable immigration: the 'qualified one.' The characteristics of this 'qualified immigration' are not specified; however, it must be economically beneficial to the country and contribute to its development.

Outward mobility—emigration—an increasingly relevant issue for the country, is presented in the manifestos as something rather temporary: Italian emigrants are never referred to as such, and the concept of diaspora is never employed to identify more recent flows of emigration; the term is never explicitly mentioned. Italian emigration appears temporary as both manifestos explicitly discuss strategies and policies to ease the return of Italians currently abroad. This focus on Italians' potential return underlines the temporality that characterizes this emigration, according to these parties. Emigration is, at times, mentioned as a societal problem in Italy under the term 'brain drain'—strictly referring to younger Italians

with higher education—and through the description of ‘depopulated areas of Italy’ such as mountainous and countryside areas. Depopulation is mentioned but rarely specifically linked to outward migration and never considered a consequence of outward mobility— either people moving towards urban centers or out of the country—abroad. Emigration is not mentioned as a concern or disruption for the country except in the case of young graduates moving abroad due to the impossibility of finding a job with their degrees; this is described in particular by Lega as a problem of investment in university services and how they prepare young people to access the job market. There is a denial of emigration as a more general Italian issue.

In the documents, distrust towards the above-mentioned actors develops in parallel with a narrative displaying trust towards the Italian citizen—who is generally a good person (*Italiani brava gente*), a hard worker, friendly, and generous; the victim of a system that does not have their best interest at hearts, and a hero for surviving under such disastrous circumstances. The nostalgia of the *bel paese* transpires from discourses around the country’s rich history and magnificent collection of arts and culture—most of which were created when Italy was still very far from being a country at all, which is obviously never mentioned—and the importance of tradition for the country to thrive and return to the growth experienced during the peninsula’s glorious past. This past is located both in a remote past, such as the Renaissance—used by FdI’s narrative to underline that Italy needs a new *Rinascimento*, which they indeed promise—but also in a more recent time before the extremist ideologies of the left became popular: wokeism, politically correct ideology, multiculturalism, ‘ideological environmentalism,’ and gender identity ideology¹³. In both manifestos, Italy is described as ‘the most beautiful country in the world,’ ‘homeland of Christianity,’ and ‘cradle of Western civilization,’ whose tradition and identity need to be protected. This discourse of protection is not just a call to action but a unifying force that binds all Italians in a shared purpose and identity.

Whom must Italy be protected from? A nostalgic discourse allows the manifestos to delve deeper into the critical issues of Italian society and politics today—many societal novelties have brought struggle and threats to the country. Italy, its ‘Western values,’ and its citizens are threatened. Political elites of the left have governed the country against its interests, especially regarding migration and environmental policy and the relationship with the EU—giving up Italian interests in the name of supranationalism. This sense of betrayal by the political elites fuels the call for change and a return to what is defined as Italian values. The EU is also viewed with suspicion—as an entity that gives orders but leaves empty promises/

¹³ The ideology of gender identity is represented, according to both radical right parties, by the Ddl Zan, a bill which took the name of the deputy of the Partito Democratico (Italian left), Alessandro Zan, and which proposed specific measures to tackle homophobia and sexism in the country. Both parties promise in several parts of the manifestos to firmly oppose the Ddl Zan, the symbol of an ‘extremist LGBTQ+ ideology,’ and all measures which would seem to go in the same direction.

emptiness [*lascia vuoti*]. The EU, which is referred to as ‘Brussels’—the city that is its bastion, often described as present but helpless—is far from knowing what the Italian citizen wants and needs. The EU does not know what is best for Italy: Lega and Fratelli d’Italia promise to bring Italian interests to the supranational table, defending sovereignty, subsidiarity, and autonomy.

While they both stress the need to protect national sovereignty, Lega, due to its identitarian history based on the fight for separatism and autonomy in the North of Italy, focuses much of its discourse on the defense of local and regional autonomy for a ‘federalist process’ that could take place on the peninsula. This discourse is often connected to the description of the central government and its bureaucracy as ineffective, inefficient, and slow: in the name of this inefficiency and the need for governability and efficiency [*governabilità e efficienza*], both parties underline the need to introduce presidentialism—the direct election of the Head of State—as Italians are tired of coping with unstable governments that easily fall and change, contributing to dissatisfaction and economic decline. While presidentialism is set to solve the Italian government’s legacy of instability and, consequently, its financial situation, it is an increase in the budget for defense—and the Italian police forces—that, in the eyes of both parties, is set to solve the illness of distrust and the feeling of unsafety that is damaging Italian society in recent times. The obsession with protection and security is visible in many parts of the analyzed manifestos: defense is what brings security and safety in such unstable and unpredictable times—the ones we are living in. As a result, it is an increased budget for defense forces that will bring us back to more secure times—the good old times.

‘Resurrecting’ Portugal: Chega’s quest for the ‘virtuous Portuguese’ within and abroad

10 March 2024: André Ventura, leader of the Chega (CH) Party, announced the end of ‘the two-party system’ in Portugal when it became known that his party had achieved more than 1 million votes, thus consolidating CH as the third political power in parliament. Ventura’s boastful words upon his party’s newly acquired coalition power point to what has been called ‘the normalization of the radical right’ (Valentim, 2024), whose electoral success leads individuals to become more comfortable with expressing such views while encouraging more politicians, both experienced and aspiring, to join a growing party. Indeed, CH’s growth since its creation in 2019 has made it a force to be reckoned with, even if most parties, from left to right, from the opposition to the government, had sworn to keep, in more or less unequivocal terms, a ‘cordon sanitaire’ [*cerco sanitário*] against CH in any coalitions or agreements. But the political establishment that shuns CH is precisely the one CH points the finger at, finding in it the culprits for the ‘systemic corruption growing in the public institutions [that,] like a toxic element[,] [erodes] ... the trust that the Portuguese have on institutions and politicians’ (Chega, 2024: 3), further weakening the confidence in representative democracy from within, alongside a purported threat posed by the European Union in its present federalizing ‘model’ to the Portuguese ‘sovereignty and national independence’ (ibid: 160).

‘Increasing the trust of the Portuguese in politics’ (Chega, 2024: 9) is defined by CH as a priority in its 2024 manifesto, right from the first section of the political program, addressing the issue of corruption. Distrust thus sets the tone and provides the lens through which CH identifies its role as the sole representative of ‘the majority of the Portuguese people’ (ibid: 8) against local and national corrupt elites and the establishment [*o sistema*] furthering their interests, which ‘the Portuguese’ have good reason to distrust. Calling to itself the mission of ‘cleaning Portugal’ of self-serving elites, their ideological allies, and other malevolent forces, bundling together all the enemies of ‘the people,’ CH uses such an expression as a slogan throughout the electoral campaign, pointing to the party’s broader task, through a messianic wording with nostalgic underpinnings, of ‘resurrecting a country in which the family, society and fatherland [*pátria*] are at the core of a meritocratic culture in earnest’ (ibid: 9), and thus restoring the trust of ‘the people’ whose interests they commit to represent. Piggybacking on strong religiosity, dissatisfaction with traditional politics, and cultural criticism of globalization and immigration (Marchi and Zúquete, 2024), CH frames key elements with a clear populist character, such as anti-elitism; the centrality of an idea of ‘the people’; an ‘anti-system’ rhetoric; nationalism with a nativist logic; and a sort of messianism (Prior, 2021). ‘The people’—an elusive, albeit clearly moral(izing), concept—is ever present in CH’s discourse. An ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2005), ‘the people’ is used in contrast to (a lesser) something else; usually, ‘the people,’ a righteous, untainted national group, against corrupt, self-serving ‘elites.’

‘The people’ and ‘the elite’ are thus discursively constructed in direct opposition to each other, one representing the ‘virtuous Portuguese’ [*Portugueses de bem*], often invoked in Ventura’s discourse, and the other personified by those in office who allegedly used the post-revolution democratic developments ‘to settle themselves into power and seize benefits and advantages [for themselves]’ (Chega, 2024: 8). The former—the people—is a force for good, which CH claims to be the voice of, while the latter is the main reason for the ‘rottenness that spread from north to south, including islands, and only we [Chega] have the courage to face it and clean Portugal from it’ (ibid: 3).

CH’s nativist discourse surrounding what ‘people’ the party claims to represent has evolved to rely more heavily on immigration issues, becoming more similar to other European populist radical right parties alongside a consistent trend of an increasing migrant population in Portugal (Oliveira and Reis, 2023). However, one of the main threats identified by CH in earlier party discourse had been the Roma community, regarded as living at the margins of the law and the state under a self-imposed segregation from the general population and, next to corruption, as one of the main drainers of public funds. This enemy of the ‘virtuous Portuguese’ is absent from the 2024 legislative manifesto despite its salience ever

since the party's inception.¹⁴ The 2024 manifesto blames instead socialist fiscal policies—characterized as ‘inadequate’ and ‘persecutory of the wealth-creation process, as it penalizes the salaries of those who work the most and put more effort’ (Chega, 2024: 56)—and immigration policies, positioning them under a lens of distrust by placing the moral and practical shortcomings of these policies on national, and to a lesser extent supranational, elites.

For CH, both immigration and emigration are moral issues with political and cultural content. According to the manifesto, the former has been managed through ‘open-door irresponsible policies’ with serious implications for the country, such as the burden placed on the welfare system, linking, moreover, immigration to increased criminality. Adopting a conspiratorial tone—‘contrary to what they would have you believe’ (Chega, 2024: 50), ‘they’ being an unspecified, albeit broad, entity within a narrative of distrust—CH claims to voice the thoughts and feelings of the common citizen, for ‘the Portuguese also thinks so’:

Chega is not against immigration or immigrants. Chega recognizes the importance of immigrants in several sectors of the national economy. Chega is, instead, against immigration without control, of ‘open doors’, [according to which] everyone can enter Portugal without any control. Chega is against an immigration that only seeks social benefits. Massive. That does not want to integrate. That wants to change us and subjugate us culturally, that does not respect our traditions.

According to this view, more regulation means not only tighter control at the border but also ‘to change the paradigm of nationality obtention,’ to select immigrants based on labor demands and their lack of criminal record, promote integration, and institute the ‘crime of illegal residency on Portuguese soil’ (Chega, 2024: 51). This securitizing prescription further distinguishing ‘the virtuous Portuguese’ from immigrants points to the distrust of non-nationals— particularly those of Muslim faith, as ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is singled out—but even more predominantly to distrust of the elite supporting ‘irresponsible policies’ (ibid: 50). Ultimately, the political elite is the one to blame, as it is allowing in the type of immigrants that, according to CH, threaten the welfare and traditions of the ‘virtuous Portuguese.’

Emigration is also a matter of concern in two sections of the manifesto, on the youth and the diaspora. Unemployment and unattractive salaries leave the highly qualified youth with no option but to leave the country: a ‘social catastrophe with serious political responsibilities, that demonstrates the moral

¹⁴ The ‘othering’ of the Roma community was present in Ventura’s discourse even when he was still a member of PSD, which is presently the country’s ruling party. As a candidate to mayor in Loures, Ventura made several discriminatory statements against the community in the 2017 local elections. After a public struggle against the party leadership in 2018, Ventura left his office as local councilor [*autarca*] in Loures and the party, creating CH shortly after. The Roma community was, since 2019, consistently singled out as one of the enemies of the ‘virtuous Portuguese’ in CH’s discourse, continuing to be a hot topic during the 2021 presidential campaign and, to a lesser degree, in the 2022 legislative campaign.

collapse of this Republic and those who govern it' (Chega, 2024: 62). From the labor problem affecting the youth, CH diagnoses others for 'youngsters that are less free than their parents or grandparents were,' jumping from economic issues to a 'perversion of the notion of freedom' that allows young people to choose 'bathrooms' and 'pronouns' but prevents them from having a fair salary, buying a car, or renting their own apartment before turning 30. The culprit here is also clearly stated: there is an 'amputated generation' due to 'decades of a socialist government' (ibid.: 63).

The acritical recalling of the supposedly better times lived by the 'parents and grandparents' of this young generation uses nostalgia as a narrative device to inflame distrust, according to which the elites and their ideological allies have perverted the traditional idea of freedom—and implicitly are on their way to defile the morality of a whole generation—to hide their failings in providing true freedom stemming from financial independence. The diaspora, on the other hand, is a 'valuable asset' for the country and its moral virtue exalted as part of the Portuguese people. The Portuguese emigrant, a nostalgia-coded metaphor for the Portuguese keeping the connection with ancestral roots and preserving traditions in spite of distance and time, is the ideal immigrant in other countries, for they integrate 'peacefully' and are respectful of the host countries' laws and customs 'without ever abdicating of their roots' (ibid: 154).

Through a moral estimation of the Portuguese emigrant, CH aggrandizes the Portuguese population numerically: 'Portugal has 15 million inhabitants and not just the 10 million who reside in national territory' (ibid.: 154). Therefore, CH proposes the creation of a Ministry for the Portuguese Diaspora [*Ministério das Comunidades*], with a new attitude aiming to integrate these communities 'around the world' into the national whole, i.e., 'the people' embodying a set of virtues under their 'Portuguese-ness [*portugalidade*],' which CH claims to represent. Throughout the manifesto, CH takes for granted several assumptions about the 'Portuguese identity,' its 'European nature and Atlantic vocation' (Chega, 2024: 63). The exaltation of the people—or an idea of a 'virtuous Portuguese'—relies on the glorification of the past. Like a 'trojan horse', present ideologies (labeled 'neo-Marxist woke') and ('globalizing') agendas (ibid: 102), to which the allegedly corrupt national elites ascribe, threaten the memory of a glorious past when 'Portugal built a maritime empire that amazed the world, creating wealth never seen before in a kingdom wedged between mighty Castile and the Atlantic' (ibid.: 68). According to CH, it is from this past and their ancestors that the 'virtuous Portuguese' should take inspiration in the mission of developing and protecting the country while preserving its culture. The exaltation of this skewed view of the historical past makes it even more urgent to unite 'the virtuous Portuguese' domestically and abroad against foreign forces that threaten to subjugate them and 'corrupt elites' who hinder the fulfillment of a grandiose national destiny.

Make Spain great again? Vox against the 'enemies' of the nation

‘We will not let you down, we will resist, Spain will resist,’ promised Santiago Abascal, leader of the Vox party, after knowing the results of the 2023 general elections (Vox España, 24 July 2023). Despite falling short of fulfilling Vox’s ambitions, the electoral results once again confirmed Vox as the third political power in Spain after entering the Andalusian Parliament in 2018 and rising at the national level in the general elections of April 2019, further consolidating its power in the new general elections taking place in November of that same year. Although Vox’s electorate is in line with the usual preoccupations of the PRR repertoire—‘socio-demographics, political dissatisfaction, media diet, and the rejection of immigration and feminism’ (Heyne and Manucci, 2021)—its populist character has been subject to extensive debate among Spanish scholars.

Ferreira (2019: 89-90, 92), for example, while positioning the party clearly on the radical right in the political spectrum, argues that populism is not an ‘explicit’ feature of Vox, as the party ‘is much more nationalist than populist’ (ibid: 94). Aranda Bustamante and Escribano (2022) as well as Rubio-Pueyo (2019) highlight the importance of Francoist legacies to Vox’s ideology, pointing to a Francoism-influenced post-fascist discourse with a populist character. Franzé et al. (2022) posit that it is the ‘post-fascist’ character of Vox that confers to the party a ‘toned down and inverted populism,’ supposedly ‘focused on the designation and defense of a special ‘We’ (p. 87) and in constructing an opposition between expressions of Spanish-ness and anti-Spanish minority collectives (‘secessionism’, feminism, ‘the left,’ immigrants, etc.). The latter are perceived as being presently empowered to the detriment of the traditional status quo and the national order based on the 1978 Constitution and the process of Transition [*la Transición*] from the Francoist regime to a constitutional democracy.

We consider Vox to be a populist radical right party in the full sense of the term. Although it is nationalism that provides an overarching rhetoric to populist elements, that does not in itself negate the populist character of Vox’s discourse. Ultimately, like its Portuguese and Italian counterparts, Vox formulates political content and ideological postulates, here extracted from its 2023 manifesto, based on populist assumptions, even if and when it does so by resorting to metaphorical framings (Capdevila et al., 2022). Contrary to what has been argued by Franzé et al. (2022), we contend that Vox’s political program includes an anti-elite positioning that does not contradict but rather reinforces the multiplicity—and thus the supposed danger—of enemies, brought together under the alleged neglect or even jeopardy posed by the Sánchez government to the Spanish nation. Moreover, the usage of anti-elite language may be seen as fitting Vox’s broader strategy—starting in 2020, with slogans such as ‘*obrero y español*’ and the creation of the Solidarity Union appealing to a more working-class electorate (Lerín Ibarra, 2024)—to become a catch-all party.

In Vox’s (2023) manifesto, each and every one of its 20 sections starts by unequivocally placing the blame on Sánchez and his government for the evils plaguing the Spanish nation and the problems

threatening the well-being of the Spaniards. Although, contrary to CH's manifesto, trust [*confianza*] or lack thereof [*desconfianza*] is not mentioned once, the distrustful, anti-elite tone is clear from the onset:

Pedro Sánchez will be remembered as the President [of the Government] who was hard and relentless with the honorable Spaniards and soft with the criminals, the enemies of Spain and the foreign elites. His concessions to separatism and his commitment to a multi-level Spain has only benefited the autonomic elites, allowing for the consolidation of an unjust model that hinders the prosperity and welfare of the Spaniards.

This opening paragraph—from the first section on 'Equality among Spaniards' (Vox, 2023: 7)—points to topics that are transversal to PRR parties, such as anti-elitism, but also to country-specific issues, such as national unity vis-à-vis the autonomic state [*estado de las autonomías*]. Indeed, Vox's growth at the time of the *procés català* made it easier to define an internal enemy: the independentist movements threatening Vox's recentralizing program. Such a program is inspired by and based on a key notion of Spain as a 'reality transcending the Spaniards,' a 'fatherland [*patria*]' guaranteeing rights and equality, 'a legacy' from their ancestors that should be preserved to be left as an inheritance to the next generations (ibid: 15). Indistinctive from internal enemies are other nefarious forces that have detached the 'compatriots' from the nation, due to 'the ideological indoctrination' caused by 'separatism and globalism.' According to Vox, this twofold indoctrination spreads to (and 'contaminates') every aspect of life, assisted by feminism, multiculturalism, and *progresismo* under the umbrella of the so-called 'extreme left.' Moreover, this indoctrination would find support in a Sánchez government 'drifting to authoritarianism' (ibid: 155), allegedly complicit with this agenda due to the 'socialist and globalist' character of its policies (ibid: 21, 31, 63, 99, 115). Therefore, 'more than any previous government,' Sánchez and his government personify to Vox a 'direct enemy' of the development and prosperity of the nation (ibid: 47) and, therefore, cannot be trusted.

'Spain'—i.e., the nation—takes a central role and replaces 'the people' in Vox's discourse. 'Spain' is an alternative 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2015); however, it is still in opposition to the elite, serving the same function and combining an idea of 'the people'. Both 'socialists and their allies' are not only hinted to be corrupt (Vox, 2023: 19) but also traitors (ibid: 15) of Spain and 'the honorable Spaniards.' There is, thus, a nativist, exclusionary, and righteous notion of 'the people'—'the honorable Spaniards' of ancestral lineage or 'the virtuous Spaniards' [*los españoles de bien*], as Abascal had also called them in 2019 (Público, 20 March 2019)—underlying Vox's idea of 'Spain.'

'Uncontrolled' and 'illegal' immigration (Vox, 2023: 21, 63) are prominent buzzwords in the party's repertoire. The link between immigration and criminality is clearly stated in the causality established between 'the uncontrolled arrival of millions of illegal immigrants' and the 'suffering' of 'Spanish families,' a consequence of the 'globalist policies' promoted by Sánchez's government, leading

to ‘insecurity and the degradation of their neighborhoods’ (ibid: 99). Vox lays out its proposals in contrast to a despised ‘multicultural model,’ of which Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom are given as the most alarming examples. The party claims to support, therefore, ‘a controlled, legal immigration, adapted to Spain’s needs,’ prioritizing newcomers with ‘the ability and will to integrate’ (ibid: 99); more concretely, those coming from a nostalgically fantasized transnational space to which Vox calls the ‘Iberosphere.’ These newcomers are not referred to as simply immigrants but rather as ‘citizens arriving from the nations sharing the language and important ties of friendship, history and culture with Spain’ (ibid: 101). It is, thus, the nostalgic recalling of past imperial relations that makes a specific type of immigrant congruent with Vox’s nationalist idea of Spain, as these immigrants are redeemed by a notion of shared culture and ancestry via past colonization. They can even be understood as part of the historic ‘nation’ exalted by the party, for ‘Spain cannot renounce to being the epicenter of this brotherly community [the Iberosphere] of free, sovereign nations’ (ibid: 141). This position reclaims, thus, a glorious historical past evoking the ‘achievements and feats of our national heroes within and beyond our borders’ (ibid: 17). Such a selective memory emphasizes, of course, ‘Spain’s contribution to universal civilization and history’ and it is, moreover, perceived as essential to the diffusion and protection of national identity, which is threatened yet again by ‘the extreme left’s liberticide agenda’ and a compliant Sánchez government (ibid: 141).

Although Vox does not express any views on emigration at the national level, its concern with social and territorial inequalities vis-à-vis an emptying process of ‘the rural Spain’ says something of its stance regarding regional emigration, fitting into a broader narrative of ‘the emptied Spain’ [*la España vaciada*]. By using such an expression, Vox not only nostalgically reimagines a past ‘rural Spain’ and a more prosperous hinterland but also attributes agency to its decline and depopulation, imposed by Sánchez’s ‘anti-countryside policies’ (Vox, 2023: 147) and implicitly furthered by the political blackmail of independentist movements, as they tend to focus on affluent, coastal regions. Vox’s answer is to ‘repopulate the rural Spain,’ namely through policies aimed at incentivizing the youth to stay and boosting the rural economy as well as the birth rate (ibid: 148–152). The ‘rural Spain’ is both literal and figurative: the countryside gives Spain ‘produce sovereignty’ and is the last bastion of tradition in a conservative longing for a past untainted by *progresismo* and ‘globalizing ideologies.’

In its defense of (a notion of) Spain, its identity, and traditional values, Vox establishes an equivalence between the party and ‘the nation’ (Fernández Riquelme, 2020) through the nostalgic recalling of a glorious past, often in contrast to the present situation brought about by a harmful government complicit with internal and external ‘enemies of Spain.’ Although not openly anti-EU, Vox proposes ‘another vision of Europe’ that comprises ‘free, sovereign nations,’ claiming, moreover, a cultural affinity and shared interests in the context of the Southern European region specifically (Vox, 2023: 133–135). There is, thus, the underlying idea that ‘the nation’ has been wronged, both internally and abroad, and that,

informed by a former glory, there is something to be restituted to Spain against present forces seeking its political, economic, and moral decline, thus vindicating their main victim, ‘the honorable Spaniard.’

Discussion and conclusion

By proposing a skewed view of what was—the society, the country, and its might—PRR parties propose a political program for what should become in the future, informed by a nostalgic recalling of the past. Absolving the ‘righteous’ people for the perceived evils plaguing the country, PRR parties put the blame on elites and their perceived allies, internal and external enemies of the people they claim to represent. The populist people-centered view focuses on a narrow, exclusive national group (the ‘Italian good people,’ the ‘virtuous Portuguese,’ and the ‘honorable Spaniard’), victimized by national and/or supranational elites, ‘globalizing’ agendas, and ‘woke extreme- left’ ideologies, as well as othered minorities. Distrust comes through nostalgic appeals to the people against an elite for the return to a glorious era and the restitution of national dignity. Figure 1 shows how we identify a specific narrative strategy in these PRR parties’ manifestos: while we identify terms related to the feeling of nostalgia and distrust, nostalgia is used in the manifestos to specifically convey distrust that is channeled towards specific receivers.

A specific narrative aimed at glorifying what society was in the past enables distrust channeled towards political actors (national and supranational elites), political and societal movements (ideologies), and specific groups within society (minorities). Nostalgic narratives thus play into fears of what is characteristic of today’s society—considered as new— contrasting with an imagined society of the past.

We focus on the topic of mobility to understand the nostalgia narrative framework used by Southern European PRR parties as a device in dialogue with and an instrument to reinforce distrust. Indeed, all four political manifestos under analysis present opposition to immigration by identifying the type of immigration (‘uncontrolled,’ ‘illegal,’ ‘massive,’ ‘that does not want to integrate’) allowed by national or supranational elites and their ‘ideological allies’ as a threat to the nation and the people. Therefore, immigration fits the nostalgic narrative as a ‘threat’ to the national identity informed by past feats and glory, to criticize a decline intertwining morality and ethno- demographics—constructing, thus, the idea of a righteous, superior national against a foreign, backward other who is jeopardizing the former’s safety, traditions, values, and ethnic majority. Furthermore, the narrative surrounding immigration prompts distrust of elites and their ‘ideological allies,’ not only due to the agency that is attributed in the context of this phenomenon but also through a conspirative notion that such elites purposedly ignore or neglect the popular will, thus failing to represent the national majority’s view on the topic.

In the Italian examples, both in Lega’s and FdI’s 2022 manifestos, immigration is presented as a strictly negative phenomenon as it forces people to leave their country of origin due to economic struggles and, more importantly, creates a state of emergency in Italy. Both parties declare themselves ready to accept a specific type of immigration that they define as ‘qualified, useful and necessary for the country’s

development’ as opposed to an ‘illegal’ immigration. There is no mention whatsoever of Italian past colonial projects and how these might affect migration routes today, or the relationship with former Italian colonies. Immigration is presented as a current, disruptive phenomenon, which is not linked to any other phenomenon if not with criminality and terrorism. Lega and FdI thus completely invisibilize legacies of what could be defined as an Italian empire and its colonial endeavors, which differs from the Spanish and Portuguese PRR parties.

Recalling the imagined space of a former empire allows Vox in its 2023 manifesto to reconcile a specific type of immigrants with the party’s idea of ‘nation’ through a shared culture and language. CH, however, does not make the same exception for those coming from former Portuguese colonies. The party even suggests the revoking of the mobility agreement between Portugal and these countries, congruent with its position on the ‘injustices’ of the decolonization process to the white (–majority) Portuguese returnees [*retornados*] upon the independence of former African colonies. Although exceptions to othering processes may apply according to the parties’ selective recalling of the national past and view on historical experiences, such as those of colonization and decolonization, their overarching nostalgic narrative on immigration is similar. The four manifestos, while at times identifying a specific type of immigration that they consider acceptable, generally portray the phenomenon as a threat to ‘the people,’ identifying the culprits who are seeking the downfall of the nation (i.e., center-left governments and/or the EU, ‘globalizing’ agendas and ‘woke extreme-left’ ideologies).

It is on emigration that these parties’ manifestos presented more variation in the narrative adopted. While Lega and FdI mention the topic as part of a nostalgic grand narrative, they do so by mentioning it with alternative terms, such as ‘brain-drain’ or the ‘threat of de-population,’ while never mentioning explicitly emigration or referring to a more recent Italian diaspora. The two parties plan to attract Italians abroad by giving benefits upon their return as if they believed they are simply set to return to the homeland: these people are never defined as migrants or emigrants but rather as Italians abroad, specifying through this denomination that it is Italy these people belong to. The Italian enormous diaspora is as well selectively ignored in the narrative: the Italians abroad will come back to Italy and this is when they will matter to these parties again. Until then, they are not mentioned nor considered. Similarly, Vox does not mention the issue of national outward migration specifically, but emigration from the countryside to the city or between autonomous communities is included implicitly, in the context of a broader narrative on ‘the rural Spain’ as an ‘emptied Spain.’ This narrative is also nostalgic in the idealization of ‘rural Spain’ as a primary and primitive resource, a stronghold of traditions and values—of Spanish-ness—thus reinforcing distrust of an elite (personified by Sánchez and his government) by blaming it for depopulation due to ‘anti-countryside’/anti-Spain policies. CH has perhaps the most elaborate inclusion of emigration into a broader nostalgic narrative. On the one hand, CH sees emigration as an inevitable ‘social catastrophe’ for a

Portuguese youth that is supposedly less free than their parents and grandparents were, because of a perversion of the notion of freedom through which national elites promote moral corruption and inhibit economic prosperity. On the other hand, the party exalts the diaspora and its moral fiber, discursively integrating the millions of Portuguese around the world into a notion of ‘virtuous Portuguese,’ the people CH claims to represent. The party does not necessarily call (although it encourages) the Portuguese emigrant to return as part of a patriotic mission; they present an economic, numeric, and moral advantage to Portugal from abroad, as a sort of post-imperial expansion by other means. CH’s nostalgic narrative on emigration binds together the longing for a better past (the times lived by ‘parents and grandparents’) and the nostalgic recalling of expansion as an asset to the country and a trait of Portuguese-ness (Table 3).

Emigration seems, thus, to be a topic shaped by specific ideological and historical legacies of the past, while immigration is more consistently placed within a narrative of threat against ethnic homogeneity posed by powerful and purposeful anti-patriotic elites. More broadly, one can say that the challenges—a shrinking national *ethnie* and erosion of those deemed values of the nation— and the culprits—neglectful or conspiring elites—are the same. When identifying such challenges and culprits, these parties infuse moral content and a comparison with a better past into their rhetoric. While distrust represents a central emotion in populist discourse, through this piece, we show how nostalgia helps convey this emotion channeled toward specific actors in society. It is through nostalgic discourse that PRR parties are able to build a distrust-framing narrative on both inward and outward mobility. Future research would need to delve deeper into the role of emotions in political discourse, underlining how strategic uses of emotions make discourses more appealing to and successful among specific audiences.

Visualization 1. Dynamics of Nostalgia and Distrust

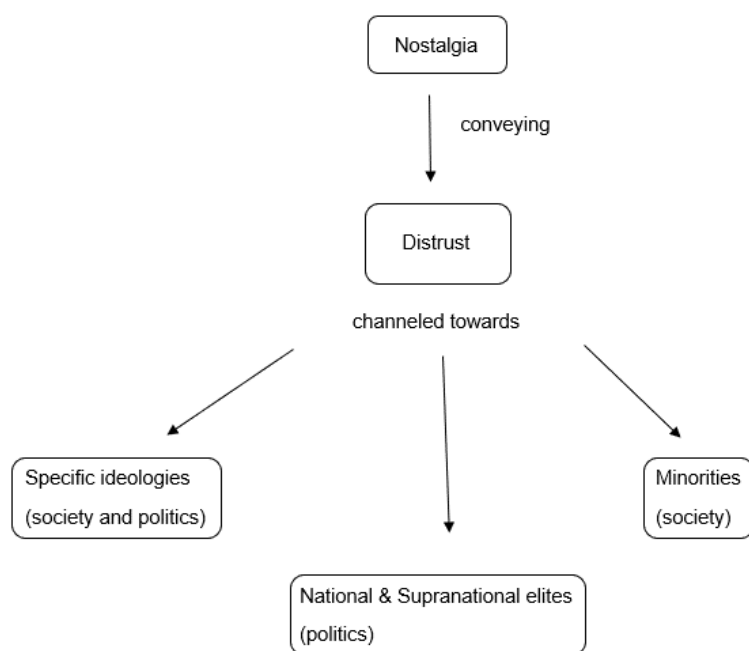


Table 3. Topic Relevance and Narrative in the Party Manifestos of Lega, FdI, CH, and Vox

Party	Immigration	Emigration
Lega	High relevance [a threat weaponized by national and supra-national elites and their allies]	Low relevance [only alternative terms to emigration are used, diaspora disregarded as such]
Fratelli d'Italia	High relevance [a threat weaponized by national and supra-national elites and their allies]	Low relevance [only alternative terms to emigration are used, diaspora disregarded as such]
Chega	High relevance [a threat weaponized by national and supra-national elites and their allies]	High relevance [national emigration of youngsters as symptom of moral corruption and stunted economic growth; diaspora embodying a patriotic mission]
Vox	High relevance [mostly a threat, except when immigrants originate from a former colony (shared culture argument)]	Moderate relevance [regional emigration as erosion of Spanish-ness, anti-Spain policies]

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Empirical Article IV

Shaping European Borders Beyond Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Two Spanish Borderscapes

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Abstract

What happens at European borders shapes the way we talk and think about migration flows and migrants. Borders of the European Union (EU) permeate European society even though they are constructed as a far, easily neglected fortress. Through this piece, we delve into the analysis of two Spanish - and EU - *borderscapes* beyond the European continent, located geographically on the African continent: the Canary Islands, an archipelago off the coast of northwestern Africa and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla bordering Moroccan territory. We analyze these *borderscapes* separately to then outline similarities and differences in their development. We argue that a.) these *borderscapes*, EU borders beyond geographical Europe, are utilized by Spain and the EU as territories where they can continue experimenting a perpetrated migration management based on securitization and militarization b.) such migration management is not effective nor pragmatic, looking at most recent consequences of securitization and externalization practices at the local and regional levels, c.) national and supranational institutions' focus on border security when looking at human migration has generated a gap in the governance in these local realities. Local NGOs and other grassroots community associations have been trying to fill this gap becoming proper migration governance actors in their own right.

Keywords

Borderscapes, EU Migration Governance, Bordering Processes

Introduction

The southern sea border of the European Union (EU) has become increasingly securitized throughout the last decade in an effort to stem unwanted migration flows to 'Fortress Europe' (Campesi, 2021; Léonard & Kaunert, 2023). What is referred to as the 'securitization of migration' refers to how receiving states frame migration as a security issue and encompasses a wide-range of practices. Such securitized framings result in a variety of harmful practices for

migrants, which can include the detention and deportation of individuals to more subversive actions such as bureaucratic repression. A typical example of this is the introduction of complex administrative procedures to regularize their immigration status, temporary stay, or access their rights (Bello, 2022: 1327; Mountz & Loyd, 2013: 179). Such practices and discursive framings tend to result in a variety of ‘collateral damages,’ creating spaces in which violence, discrimination and xenophobia is further ‘provoked, committed, condoned, or protracted’ against individuals migrating or against ethnic minorities within host communities (Dempsey, 2020: 102; Lazaridis & Wadia, 2015).

This case selection of Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands provides a critical and understudied case comparison of islands and enclaves - specific territories and ‘convenient’ (for the moment) EU *borderscapes* (Brambilla, 2015; Krichker, 2021). Drawing on the concept of *borderscape*, used to refer to a geographical area shaped by transnational flows that have existed and developed beyond the constructed idea of the national state and its clear-cut borders, we answer the research question: what do these *borderscapes*’ characteristics and developments tell us about current EU/Spanish migration governance and their future implications? By answering this question, our paper brings forward the argument that these ‘European beyond Europe’ territories make the perfect *borderscapes* for the continuation of a management of migration based on securitization and militarization. Though this approach to migration management may appear to work for the moment in stemming migration flows to mainland Europe, there are far-reaching and damaging implications to consider, outlined and detailed further in this paper. Some of the key negative consequences of these policies and practices include the human cost paid by people on the move as well as by host communities residing in these *borderscapes*.

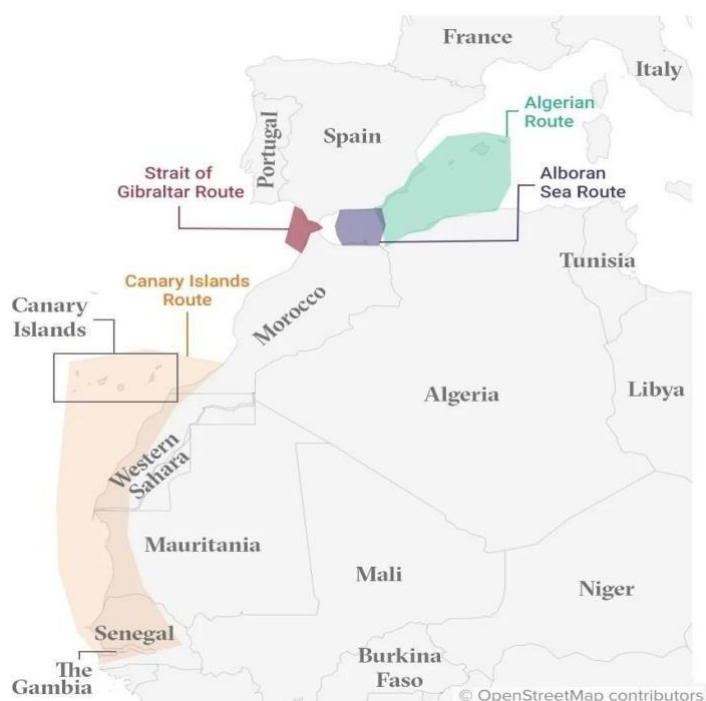
While there is growing scholarship, which seeks to spotlight the securitization of migration such as in the Balkan Route, so-called migration ‘hot-spots’, and the central Mediterranean, there remain gaps in comparative research for islands and enclaves (Hess & Kasperek, 2019; Vradis et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant given that recent research has indicated that what is happening in these border areas portends what is happening more broadly with migration with often ad-hoc crisis driven policy experimentation with constantly evolving practices to ‘manage migration’ that are replicated by other states (Mountz, 2020). Such developments generate important questions related to how EU member states on the southern periphery respond to their role as migration gatekeeper and their relationships between local, national, and regional levels (Mainwaring, 2019). Against the backdrop of an overburdened civil society, there are growing tensions and frustration among host communities coping with

the everyday realities of migration management. The increase of migration flows in one migratory route is enabled primarily by the restrictions on other routes.

This securitized EU and Spanish approach will end up damaging people on the move as well as Europeans - not in the same way or in the same timing - and, as a result, it is not an effective nor sustainable approach. Recent developments in EU migration governance such as new agreements with third countries (e.g. Morocco) enhanced the possibility for people on the move to opt for the Canarian route. The cases of the Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla allow us to further observe and explore these dynamics. Such cases may be emblematic of broader trends that can be observed in the changing social and political landscape of Southern Europe and the EU more broadly.

This working paper provides a comparative analysis of these cases highlighting some of their characteristics and explores some of the collateral damage caused by this securitized approach to migration. This has significant implications for receiving host communities and local resources who have become migration management actors, ill-equipped to provide the needed reception and inclusion conditions to migrants and asylum-seekers or respond to complex humanitarian and protection concerns.

Figure 1: Key migration corridors across the western Mediterranean and Atlantic regions



This paper presents the two cases separately to then outline a comparative analysis. In the last section, based on the findings of our comparative analysis drawing on existing literature,

secondary sources and accounts of the border based on our observations and field notes, we present our argument which advances that a.) these *borderscapes*, EU borders beyond geographical Europe, are utilized by Spain and the EU as territories where they can continue experimenting a perpetrated migration management based on securitization and militarization b.) such migration management is not effective nor pragmatic, looking at most recent consequences of securitization and externalization practices at the local and regional levels, c.) national and supranational institutions' focus on border security when looking at human migration has generated a gap in the governance in these local realities. Local Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) and other grassroots community associations have been trying to fill this gap becoming proper migration governance actors.

The Case of the Canary Islands

Background: Migration in the Canary Islands

Located off the northwest coast of Africa, the Canary Islands are an archipelago governed by Spain and are subject to Spanish and European border management strategies. With a population of 2.2 million they are the eighth most populous autonomous community in Spain and the most populous special territory of the EU (European Parliament, 2024). Historically, the Canary Islands have been the site of temporary, permanent, internal and international migration (Esteban and López Sala, 2007). Their proximity to the African continent (only 100 kilometers from the coast of Morocco) makes them a key entry point primarily for migrants, from various countries of origin, arriving from West Africa. Though it should be highlighted that geographic routes of African migration to Europe vary in terms of their starting points or countries of departure, not all of them are African, since Africa is also a transit area for people from other continents (Godenau, Buraschi, & Zapata Hernández, 2020: 2).

The increase of individuals arriving irregularly on the Western Africa-Atlantic migration route has been episodic with different increases in arrivals via other migration pathways in the region depending on the closure of other migration routes and on the situation of countries of origin (Godenau, 2012). In 2024, at least 46.843 people reached the Canary Islands, an “all-time record high” via irregular migration routes (InfoMigrants, 2025). In the second quarter of 2024, arrivals to the Canary Islands represented 77 percent of all arrivals in Spain (IOM, 2024). Migrants, with various economic and/or protection concerns, arriving on this route are primarily from Senegal, Mali, Morocco among other West African countries, though not limited to these (Godenau, 2012: 11). One of the deadliest migratory routes in the world, in 2024 alone more than 10.400 people died or disappeared in their attempt to reach Spanish shores, an average of 30 people per day (Caminando Fronteras, 2024).

The main ports of destination for maritime migration are primarily the islands of Lanzarote, followed by Gran Canaria, Tenerife, Fuerteventura, and La Gomera. New arrivals typically stay in temporary reception facilities with several camps located across the different islands. Though some migrants will be relocated to the Spanish mainland from reception facilities, many migrants are often stuck in the Canary Islands in a legal limbo either waiting for complex bureaucratic and administrative processes on their asylum applications or other regularization of stay (Fradejas- García & Loftsdóttir, 2024). Practically this occurs due to a number of factors: misinformation or poor experiences in interacting with local authorities, difficulties obtaining documentation or other administrative hurdles prevent migrants from regularizing their situation. Legal assistance and interpreters are inadequate, which is a key issue given common language barriers among migrants (No Name Kitchen, El Taller-Frontera Sur Gran Canaria, Solidary Wheels, & No Borders For Human Rights, 2025). Such resources are essential for migrants to understand and exercise their rights. Some migrants, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to regularize their legal status with many remaining undocumented. This can be attributed to different factors but in general the long waiting periods and low reception standards create uncertainty and fatigue among many migrants (Barbero, 2021: 192). Even those migrants who have obtained asylum or residency have reported informal restrictions in freedom of movement and mobility within the Canary Islands as well as to the Spanish mainland. At the mercy of police discretion, many migrants have been confined in substandard conditions (Defensor del Pueblo, 2021: 65; Ruiz Ramos, 2024: 2).

The increase of individuals arriving irregularly on the Western Africa-Atlantic migration route has become progressively framed as a security issue to be solved, often resulting in a wide-range of violence and discrimination against migrants in the Canary Islands. This reached a critical tipping point in 2021, when some Spanish residents began organizing anti-migrant protests and vigilante groups through social media platforms harassing migrants and ethnic minority citizens alike (Klitgaard, 2021). The Defensor del Pueblo (Spanish Ombudsman) highlighted that the situation of African migrants in particular was characterized by an increase in xenophobic incidents, which risk becoming a predominant trend in the Canary Islands (2021: 16). Against the backdrop of steady migration continuing in 2024, there have been sporadic anti-migrant protests in the Canary Islands among host communities (Agence France-Presse, 2024). In response to these incidents, more visible forms of resistance among migrants in irregular situations against restrictive security practices and these inter-related social dynamics have emerged. These manifestations of resistance have included public protests, hunger strikes,

acts of self-harm, among others, calling for solutions and the ‘right to have rights’ (Oberti, 2021; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2021).

The Cayuco Crisis, Evolving Security Practices and the Role of the EU

The last intensification of irregular maritime migration to the Canary Islands began in 2006 when cayucos, larger wooden fishing boats, started to arrive in the Canary Islands and the number of migrants began to steadily increase (Esteban & López Sala, 2007; Vives, 2017). The so-called ‘Cayuco Crisis,’ named after the wooden fishing boats that brought many of the migrants over, marked a new era in Spanish migration policy inducing institutional change in border management with these policies emulated and reconfigured (Godenau, 2012; López-Sala & Esteban-Sánchez, 2010; Esteban & López Sala, 2007). One of the reasons for this increased migration to the Canary Islands in the 1990s and 2000s was that the EU had helped to enforce the northern enclave borders of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, as well as the Strait of Gibraltar (Dudek & Pestano, 2019; Godenau, 2014: 135). Consequently, migrants were searching for an alternative route to enter Europe.

Border enforcement and reception infrastructure (accommodation, services, and other resources) were inadequate to handle the number of arrivals (Dudek & Pestano, 2019). Thousands of migrants became stranded in the docks of harbors in the islands, which generated social alarm, media attention and the need for the Spanish government to respond. The state response to the humanitarian situation was limited by the lack of budget and coordination (Godenau, 2012). During the Cayuco Crisis, the Spanish government sought assistance from the EU and its member states via the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and adopted the EU’s externalization of migration policy with Plan Africa, an aid package to stop migration at its source (Dudek & Pestano, 2019). This was done through EU policy prescriptions to promote development in the countries at the source of migration and to create bilateral readmission agreements with countries of origin and transit (Godenau, 2012). As a result, the number of irregular arrivals in Spain decreased steadily after its peak in 2006 due to adopting a European migration policy that continues to be emulated (López-Sala, 2009). The Cayuco Crisis was resolved through the coordinated action of multiple levels of governments and assistance from NGOs. Although it can be seen as effective, this measure faced logistical and humanitarian challenges.

Though the resources and infrastructure in the Canary Islands for reception have been improved to an extent they remain ill-equipped and unsustainable to handle these intense peaks in migration and ongoing support for many migrants post-arrival today (Godenau & Zapata Hernández, 2022). Reports of deliberate policies of inhumane detention, illegal mobility

restrictions, human rights violations, and an overreliance on deportation so-called ‘solutions’ continue to be highlighted by activists in the Canary Islands (CEAR, 2024; Allan, 2021). The backdrop of exceptional or securitized approach has generated exceptional situations and spaces in which the violations of the rights of migrants take place beyond initial reception (Iridia & Novact, 2023).

Spain’s migration management model underpinned by this securitization logic is implemented with resources and operational activities carried out by Frontex. This translates to the enhancement of security at EU external territorial borders through an increased use of coercive measures and surveillance technology, as well as the deployment of an improved system of coordinated actions or capacity support, and the implementation of agreements with the countries of origin (Carrera, 2007; Godenau, 2012). There are many concerns surrounding such approaches, particularly given that Frontex continues to be criticized as an overly-politicized body and for failing to take action against the deaths of migrants trying to reach Europe by crossing the sea (Léonard & Kaunert, 2023; Dudek & Pestano, 2019). There are many risks to consider practically and human rights implications as the externalization of border management also implies a curbing of the mobility of third-country nationals without, at times, establishing their legal status (Carrera, 2007). Though Spain had achieved its goal of curbing the flow of irregular migrants, the deficiencies in such an approach and its risks in breaching human rights of migrants are well-documented and neglect the fundamental realities of Africa as a new continent of emigration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006: 311).

This securitized and militarized approach continues to underpin migration management in the Canary Islands. Frontex and Spanish authorities have renewed their agreement for 2024 after a temporary suspension over concerns about the protection of migrant data amid increased arrivals to the Canary Islands (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024).

Securitized approaches to borders and migration are diffused, often spiralling into various manifestations that take on a life of their own (Bello, 2022). This is a key point to highlight, as securitization and humanitarianism become discursively entangled here. Framing border crossing and dangerous sea migration as a ‘tragedy,’ ‘emergency’ or a ‘crisis’ tends to justify demands for action to ‘save lives’ or rescue migrants from smugglers/traffickers, thereby reinforcing a securitized response (Moreno-Lax, 2018). Practices of rescue and assistance based on humanitarian grounds have come to shape both state and non-state action in the construction and management of migrants (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Securitizing borders and migrants becomes intertwined with humanitarianism, engendering a new form of ‘ethical policing’ that simultaneously ‘cares and controls’ with humanitarian organizations who may wittingly or

unwittingly be implicated and who will actively fill the gaps purposefully left by states (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Bird & Schmid 2021). Further complicating matters, bordering interventions and containment are no longer exercised at the external border of a state but are increasingly internalized through management practices directed to “where the migrant is” (Casas-Cortes & Cobarrubias, 2018: 232). A wide-range of informal practices and controls over ‘suspicious’ foreigners now take place before and after the person has entered the national territory containment has also been informalized: this process of bordering is undertaken by both state and non-state actors, often according to flexible and ad hoc arrangements that can be expanded, retracted or rewritten according to rapid changes in migration flows (Godenau, 2012; Gazzotti, 2023).

Current Developments: COVID-19 and Grievances with Host Communities

From 2019 onwards, Spain became the main EU destination for migrants and asylum-seekers amidst against the backdrop of access restrictions to Morocco and the western Mediterranean coast of Africa as well as the COVID-19 pandemic (Reuters, 2024). This led to a significant strain on the Spanish Asylum system and host community infrastructure and resources (Gallinal-Arias, 2021). A change in internal policies was introduced in 2019 in light of the increase in arrivals and the requirements of EU migration regulations. In order to comply with EU regulations and to avoid a ‘call factor’, migrants were no longer referred to the mainland for assistance, and movement limitations were established within the islands and on the mainland. Bilateral agreements with West African countries and Morocco have been arranged at different stages by Spanish authorities in order to facilitate deportations to countries of origin but these arrangements were impacted by COVID-19 and the related limitation of movements (Gallinal-Arias, 2021).

During the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of migrants became stranded for long periods in the docks of harbors in the islands. The initial decision was to host migrants in hotels and tourist apartments as emergency accommodation given their lack of activity due to COVID-19 restrictions. The immobility caused by the pandemic, in an archipelago characterized by tourism mobility and labor migrants, turned the migration-tourism nexus on its head transforming irregular migrants into guests of tourist establishments (Domínguez-Mujica, Parreño-Castellano & Moreno-Medina, 2022). This caused resistance in host communities and the tourism industry among host communities as it was viewed as an obstacle in attempts to revitalize tourist arrivals (Martín & Pérez, 2021). This led to the development of more permanent reception facilities and camps though capacity and conditions remain insufficient. Efforts to build new facilities have been ad hoc and have sometimes faced local

opposition and delays, resulting in continued challenges with overcrowding and inadequate living conditions for migrants. Many migrants live outside of the centers in towns or in cities across the Canary Islands often unable to access services. Different temporary reception options have been adopted on an ad hoc basis, including the encampments and the use of public and private buildings like hotels and private residences (ECRE, 2024). This contrast between tourist and migrant mobilities in the Canary Islands highlights how different forms of movement are legitimized or criminalized, often through racialized hierarchies (Tazzioli, 2021).

While tourist flows are often welcomed as economic lifelines to the Canary Islands, irregular migrants are framed as threats legitimizing their violent securitization and mobility restrictions. These mobilities are not only unequally valued but co-constitutive, or in other words, the freedom of one depends on the containment of the other (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). This serves to illustrate how mobility is governed not by movement itself, but by who moves and under what terms.

The ‘Plan Canarias’ established additional reception facilities in three islands (Fuerteventura, Gran Canaria, and Tenerife), where migrants are referred after initial identification procedures upon arrival or when rescued, which included COVID-19 testing and quarantine (Dahlia, 2024). Those sites are managed by different NGOs, intend to provide adequate standards of assistance to migrants, and identify vulnerabilities and those entitled to request international protection (as asylum seekers or persons of concern). The State Secretary for Migration of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration directly manages facilities in addition to NGOs, often funded by the State Secretary for Migration to run reception centers for asylum seekers (ECRE, 2024). Many of these facilities are apartments and many migrants often live in shared accommodation in apartments not run by NGOs, informal makeshift tents or other precarious informal. The Spanish Red Cross, local NGOs and other grassroots community associations play an essential role in providing migrants with legal protection, medical assistance, accommodation and other services (Defensor del Pueblo, 2021).

In 2024, the number of mostly undocumented migrants arriving irregularly on Spain’s Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean was more than five times higher than 2018 and 2019 combined (Dahlia, 2024). The restrictions on other migration routes in north and sub-Saharan Africa have pushed many more to embark on the dangerous journey. Additional push factors in this case comprise of the political instrumentalization of migrants by Morocco (as it happened later in Ceuta), in the case of the departures from Western Sahara, and the fishing arrangements between the EU and some countries in Africa which affected traditional fishing practices and increased departures from Mauritania and Senegal (Black, 2021: 12; Dahlia, 2024). COVID-19

demonstrated many cracks in the migration reception system and complexities that can be observed at the local, national and regional levels. It has been underlined that the emergency approach adopted in dealing with the situation on the islands resulted in lack of access to information, rights and the right to asylum. This also leads to severe delays in procedures such as identification, age assessment, access to residence permits for children, enrolment in education, training and vocational courses and lack of accommodation for ageing out adolescents (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021). The increase in people arriving by sea contributed to tensions between regional authorities in the Canary Islands and the central government with broken negotiations on reforming the Law on Foreigners to require regional authorities to accept migrant children and young people relocated from the Canary Islands (Human Rights Watch, 2020, 2025). The regional prosecutor's office and Spain's human rights Ombudsperson expressed concern over putting children at increased risk of rights violations and about the lack of school places for migrant children arriving in the Canary Islands, with local authorities saying that they were overwhelmed (ibid).

Regarding migration governance and the role of the state and the EU, the Spanish Government and EU agencies continue to be involved in managing migrant flows, but coordination and resources remain a pervasive issue. Recent efforts have focused on improving facilities and increasing transfers to mainland Spain. This is an ongoing challenge given the fragmented nature of state agencies in border and migration control (Zapata Hernández, 2021). In 2024 in an effort to curb migration, Spain has asked Frontex to resume an air and maritime surveillance operation that had ended in 2018 in Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia (Al Yahyai, 2024). This exceptional or securitized approach continues to generate exceptional situations and spaces in which the violations of the rights of migrants take place (Iridia & Novact, 2023). More broadly, as Kemp highlights, it is worth reflecting that pursuant to Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, people have the right not only to asylum but also to seek asylum so if a state tries to push back those trying to reach its shores, it must not do so at the expense of those seeking, and entitled to, protection (2016). It should be highlighted that in 2023, the majority of people arriving in the Canary Islands expressed their wish to apply for international protection, in contrast to previous years (CEAR, 2024).

Officials on the Canary Islands have asked the Spanish government for more assistance arguing they do not have sufficient resources or capacities to manage the scale of arrivals. Local state actors, NGOs, associations and citizens' grassroots movements are arguably the backbone of migration governance in the Canary Islands. Local organizations and networks of receiving host communities can support and advocate for migrants, provide services in the absence of the

state, and develop relationships and solidarity with migrants. Non-state local actors typically operate in response to the state or regional level directives and policies, which often lack this local perspective, or understanding of the infrastructure, support and/or practical resources required for implementation. Against this backdrop, the presence of policy does not mitigate the persistent challenges of limited available resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and tensions within communities.

On the other side of this, migrant-receiving host communities can engage in discrimination, violence, harassment, and xenophobia towards migrants. Local host community hostilities and tensions have ebbed and flowed through anti-migrant protests. In July 2024, hundreds in the Canary Islands protested against the influx of migrants across cities and towns throughout the islands, with local media putting their numbers at several hundred (Agence France Press, 2024). There are significant concerns among many host communities spanning issues of integration, employment opportunities, livelihood stability, housing, local reputation, access to rights, and social services, among other issues. This is unsurprising given the dependence on the high structural unemployment rates in the islands with youth unemployment in particular, significantly higher than the national average in Spain along with Ceuta and Melilla (Betancort et al., 2019). The economic situation in the Canary Islands in particular has seen some recovery post- pandemic, largely due to tourism, which is a key sector for the islands yet socio-economic vulnerabilities remain. In addition to anti- migrant protests among host communities and calls for more support from the central government, there have been similar demonstrations against overtourism calling for more sustainable management and coordination (Euronews, 2024). Mass tourism has been less controlled by the state with host communities citing it is an unsustainable model that makes life unaffordable and puts a strain on already-overstretched resources and infrastructure.

The Canary Islands is often referenced as an emblematic case and “theatrical space” where EU governments develop and showcase their representation of state control over migration (Gabrielli, 2014: 315). Here, there are complex social dynamics and daily challenges that can be observed empirically that manifest from current securitized approaches to managing migration. Such approaches have resulted in an unsustainable situation often generating social conflict and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of both migrants and host communities.

The Case of Ceuta and Melilla

Historical Developments of the Enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla

The two Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, situated on the northern coast of Africa between

Moroccan territory and the Mediterranean Sea have been under Spanish control since the fifteenth century, for the former, and seventeenth century, for the latter (González Enríquez, 2007). Ceuta, a city prison, given its unique secluded geography, covers an area of 18.5 km² and is separated from the province Cádiz by only 17 km and counts 85.000 inhabitants (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016). While smaller in size (covering an area of 12 km²), Melilla counts around 86.000 inhabitants (González-Páramo, 2021). The enclaves are isolated territories, and communication between the two is complicated. There are almost 250 kilometres by sea and about 500 kilometres by road between them, and no commercial flights nor trains connect them (González Enríquez, 2007). These isolated territories are also contested territories: Morocco has never recognized Spanish sovereignty over Melilla and Ceuta, and since 1975 (end of Francoism), these enclaves have remained an unsolved colonial issue. The Mediterranean Sea separates Ceuta and Melilla from mainland Spain, where they depend economically and politically. On the other hand, despite their vicinity, specific Spanish norms separated them socially from Morocco for centuries: until 1868 Spanish norms forbade Moroccans from inhabiting the enclaves despite Moroccan farmers from the neighbouring region had long been crossing the border to Ceuta and Melilla to sell their products (González Enríquez, 2007). What has been through centuries the dominant group amongst the enclaves' inhabitants, the *cristianos* (Christians), share religious, linguistic, phenotypical and political bonds with the mainland and mainly settled in the two cities due to military duties, involvement in the colonization process or frontier trade activities (Karell, 2015; Torres Colon, 2008). Still today, military and security forces as public employees are the prevalent occupational group (for the Spanish population) in the enclaves (González Enríquez, 2007). The presence of the military is dominant - as if to constantly reiterate the understanding of the border as the space where civilizations clash and are in conflict, understanding that has been often instrumentalized in recent times by the Spanish radical right forces (de Borja Navarro, 2022).

These territories' other major group are the *musulmanes* (Muslims), a population with Moroccan origins residing in the enclaves. Moroccans from the hinterlands settled in the two enclaves throughout the end of the 19th century, mainly working as servicemen. These workers had no access to Spanish nationality: until the 1980s, they were only provided with a document that would allow them to reside in the cities – a document that lacked any legal force (González Enríquez, 2007). In 1985, Spain approved the Law on Aliens, which more favourable provisions for foreign residents from countries whose cultural and historical ties with Spain were perceived and defined as more substantial, which included Latin America, Portugal, the Philippines, Andorra, Equatorial Guinea, but not for people coming from Morocco, in spite of the fact that part of Moroccan territory had been a Spanish colony. The Law on Aliens highlighted how the existence of a Muslim and Moroccan community in Ceuta and Melilla had been largely ignored and

marginalized by mainland Spain, facing specific ethno-culturally based restrictions throughout the centuries (Briones Gómez et al., 2013; Gold, 2000; González Enríquez, 2007).

After 1987, the majority of the cities' Muslim residents – as they were constantly denied joining the national state – became formally stateless (Karell, 2015) and confronted by a new situation due to the enforcement of the provisions of the Law on Aliens of 1985: they should become regular migrants or risk expulsion from the towns (González Enríquez, 2007). It is important to underline that at that moment (1987), according to a study carried out by the Spanish National Statistical Office (Instituto Nacional de Estadística <Madrid>, 1987), 32 per cent of the total population in Melilla was Muslim, while 18 per cent in Ceuta: most of these people had born in the cities. Also, with Spain entering the European Economic Community in 1986, the territories became the EU's enclaves on the African continent (Ribas, 2015; Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023). Spain being part of the EU means that Spanish borders have gone through a process of re-bordering addressing two dimensions: one bilateral (national) and one communitarian (European), accentuated by Schengen (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023). Moreover, a corpus of literature reflected on the process of Europeanization and its role in enhancing hostility towards a constructed 'other' (De Genova, 2016; Kundnani, 2023). This 'other' challenges constructions of European identity building on clear ethnic/cultural ideas of Europe - what Kundnani (2023) reports as 'Eurowhiteness'. On these specific borderlands the transformation of the Spanish border into a European one can be considered as continuation of colonial practices translated from a national-state level to a supranational, regional one. Indeed, it is not only the Spanish border that is being controlled and defended here since Schengen, but the border with Europe and its constructed identity as 'Eurowhiteness'.

Current Developments: Relationship with Morocco, EU Externalization Practices and COVID-19 Pandemic Legacies on the Border

Ceuta and Melilla have been defined as *fronteras avanzadas* through centuries and are still perceived as a second border used to externalize Spanish and EU borders. These territories are asymmetric, multidimensional and conflictual borders. 'Asymmetric' because they re-enact and perform an economic, cultural and historical-political disparity; 'multidimensional' due to the diverse actors at different governance levels involved on these borders; and 'conflictual' due to the struggle brought by disparity and inequalities (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023; González-Páramo, 2021). Here, the mentioned *fronteras avanzadas* manifest non-physically through the ongoing cooperation with Morocco, which, despite being reluctant to recognize the enclaves as Spanish, increasingly collaborates with Spain regarding border controls due to concerns related to border crime and 'irregular' migration (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023) and receives financial support from Spain and the EU to keep migrants away from their borders (Jones et al., 2022). A non-physical *frontera avanzada* refers thus to the border's extension beyond its physical location, encompassing the cooperation between Spain, the EU, and Morocco in migration and border

control. It is a key aspect of the Ceuta and Melilla border situation, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of these territories' relationship with the EU and Morocco, territories where the tension of an environment constructed to be hostile towards specific people on the move is tangible through physical and non-physical characteristics.

Non-physical bordering is also implemented through antagonistic bureaucracy around regularization at the border and the absence of support to people on the move from national/supranational institutions. In addition, in the case of Ceuta and Melilla, evidence shows a specific hostility towards Moroccan nationals when they try to start a procedure to regularize to the point that there appears to be an unwritten rule not allowing Moroccan nationals access to the temporary stay centres for immigrants which are present on the enclaves as well as on the Canary Islands (Spanish Centres of Temporary Stay of Migrants Centros de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes – CETI)¹⁵. Ceuta and Melilla can be thus defined as limboscapas (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016), namely spaces where people on the move's trajectories towards the European continent are spatially and temporally suspended, spaces where people on the move become immobile due to difficulty of undertaking regularization processes and thus the impossibility to move further from the enclaves, EU territories where Schengen is not implemented (Briones Gómez et al., 2013; Ferrer Gallardo, 2008; Gold, 2000).

Looking at recent developments, it is key to underline how Europeanization and the implementation of Schengen transformed Ceuta and Melilla from Spanish border cities into borders of the European Union. One of the implications of this change was the creation of an increasingly securitized border between Spain and Morocco, enhancing the construction of an image of 'European Fortress' (Engelbert et al., 2019). The EU has been enhancing transborder security by giving support to Spanish efforts in implementing border control in the summer months through Joint Operation Minerva, a collaboration between the Spanish government and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, in border checks at ports where people arrive by ferries from Morocco. As reported by Frontex (2022), they deploy "forged document experts and border guards trained to detect stolen cars". Frontex is thus an involved actor - and in a constant way - on this border.

¹⁵ Data from the investigation conducted by Marino & Hategekimana (2025) reports interviews of witnesses confirming the existence of an unwritten rule, a consequence of the regulations that did not allow Moroccan *transfronterizos* to stay overnight in the Spanish territory of Melilla and Ceuta. As mentioned earlier in this piece, *transfronterizos* were allowed – before the Covid-19 break-out – to enter Spanish territory for work reasons on the condition that they had to leave the territory on the same day they could not stay overnight. As a result, *transfronterizos* were not allowed to stay in the CETIs. The rule was rapidly extended from Moroccan people living across the borders to any person of Moroccan nationality. This is not a written rule, but something summary which very much depends on the peculiar situation at the borders and on the people working in the CETI. From accounts of humanitarian workers and volunteers on this border, Moroccan people on the move's future – if on the streets or with a roof over their heads – is mostly summarily decided.

The securitized border (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022, 2024) has seen increasing humanitarian actors' involvement, which translated into a present tension between more securitarian and humanitarian actors and, consequently, discourses and practices on the border (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2024). In this tense, securitized environment, we find several civil society actors that have the mission of developing a community on the border – investing in what the border has to offer but, most crucially, offering “migration governance focused on the human side of migration” which national state and EU institutions seem to have forgotten. Humanitarian actors, part of the civil society on these borders, become migration governance actors in their own right, prioritizing a humanitarian approach to the border (Okuyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025).

Research has also investigated how a securitized border accompanied by an externalization carried out by Spain and the EU in their relationship with Morocco gave Morocco a chance to strategize the borders of Ceuta and Melilla (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022, 2024; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025). Another more recent development on the border is reflected in the legacies of COVID-19 pandemic regulations, which have brought disruptions to cross-border mobility between Morocco and the enclaves due to implemented lockdowns and tight controls on the Moroccan side of the border (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2024). The border closure implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic affected cross-border trade and cross-border workers and, interestingly, still does. In fact, the Spanish-Moroccan border reopened in May 2022 but only for Spanish and EU citizens, people with Spanish residency and/or working permits, or Schengen visas: the Schengen exception that allowed cross-border workers (Moroccans residing in the Moroccan border provinces) to enter the enclaves has not been restored (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2024; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025).

After the measures put in place regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, two were the highly mediatized episodes of border disruption in the enclaves: the so-defined Morocco-Spain border incident of the 16th of May 2021¹⁶ and the Melilla massacre of the 24th of June 2022¹⁷. These disruptive events – ‘crises’ at the border – reveal – as happened in other externalization contexts (Okuyay & Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2016) – very tangible consequences of third-country dependency in migration governance of the EU and some of its member states. They confronted the EU and Spain with the vulnerabilities of their border

¹⁶ During the so-defined Morocco-Spain border incident of the 16th of May 2021, an estimated number of 8,000 migrants crossed into the territory from Morocco to Ceuta over 36 hours. The crossing was possible due to a reduction of the usual heavy militarization of the coasts by Moroccan authorities (Kassam 2021). This reduction in the heavy militarization was supposedly the result of Rabat's frustration at the Spanish government's decision to host and offer health assistance to Brahim Ghali, leader of Western Sahara (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic). Ghali is the head of the Polisario Front, a rebel Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement claiming Western Sahara against Moroccan control of the region (Reuters 2021).

¹⁷ On the 24th of June 2024, at the abandoned border crossing of Barrio Chino, Moroccan police brutally attacked migrants attempting to cross the border into Spain. More than 20 people on the move died, and 77 are still reported missing.

regimes, especially when giving leverage and power to specific neighbouring third countries (Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022; Okay & Zaragoza- Cristiani, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2014).

Moreover, as argued by Baldwin-Edwards (2006), these borderland territories have been increasingly instrumentalized to foment an emphasis on the security in migration governance with a complete lack of coordination at the EU level of policy on immigration for employment, regularization of undocumented migrants and rights of long-term migrants as if movement on these borderlands is simply and uniquely related to the matter of security. Lacking coherent policy initiatives from the EU, Spain, and other border countries such as Italy increasingly started pursuing their own national agendas, resulting in an increasing militarization of migration governance in the Mediterranean area (Lutterbeck, 2006).

Mobility vs Migration on the Border

Mobility on these borderlands has been increasingly mainly connected to irregular migration. However, as we already mentioned, these enclaves have dealt with immigration, emigration, and transit migration for a long time, considering their geographical and political positioning throughout history—the movement of people is intrinsic to the region; it is evident. In this piece, we mentioned data related to the Muslim population of Moroccan descent residing in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and the challenges they encountered in the 1980s with the Spanish Law on Aliens. The enclaves, however, are and have been through their history first and foremost regions of transit and cross-border movements: around 30,000 people in the early 2000s would come into Ceuta and Melilla daily from the nearby Moroccan provinces of Nador, Tangier and Tetouan (González Enríquez, 2007). Traders from Morocco would buy goods in the enclaves and sell them in Moroccan territories, making this trade one of the most important economic activities in the region (Soddu, 2006). Moroccan residents of the Nador, Tetouan and Tangier provinces who would cross the border to Ceuta and Melilla daily would have a special document provided by the Spanish authorities which allowed them to enter the enclaves on condition that they leave by midnight. As discussed in this piece, this mechanism changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transnational daily mobility was thus part of the daily life of these borderlands. In addition, the enclaves have shown to be more and more eager to attract tourists and temporary mobile people. Ceuta, in particular, has recently shown interest in attracting digital creators and influencers with specific financial advantages for them – while it already has privileged taxation for the gaming business/sector (Delle Femmine & Cordero, 2024). Tourism has been indeed analyzed as the most important industry for several European enclaves (Timothy, 1995) as “these are unique from a wanderlust perspective because of the amalgamation of different cultures and community values within a limited space” (Poulaki et al., 2023: 158).

The “Border of Distrust”

Melilla and Ceuta are territories with a history of conflicts and injustices, as is the case for all territories which inherited a colonial legacy. Their transnational characteristic developed these territories as such that

they have always been scapes of encounter – even when mainly a conflictual one. The two enclaves still report and will, in the future, report a tension that reflects constant and perpetrated hostility and violence created by the then-imperial domination aims reflected in today's national state (and EU) control over its border. As Rosenberg (2022) argues, in fact, the obsession with the right to border control is not to be perceived as a feature that is inherent in sovereign states but rather as a modern consequence of White supremacy embedded in colonialism and the project of the empire. In these *borderscapes*, crossroads between empires and crucial areas for power assertion through centuries, we see the implications of the obsession with the right to border control in their most crude and violent forms.

Despite the challenges Spain and the EU face in reconciling their externalization project with the EU's normative mission and the so-proclaimed Western values focused on a human rights approach, this securitizing and externalizing vision continues. Diplomatic crisis at the border has earned the enclaves the concept of a “border of distrust” (*frontera de la desconfianza*) mentioned in the Spanish national newspaper El País when reflecting on Spain-Morocco relations and their fruitfulness and potential for the future. This phrase accurately describes the current perception of instability that such borderlands transmit and, consequently, the international relations developing when managing the border by the powers involved.

Borderscapes: What Do We Learn by Investigating These Territories? A Comparative Analysis

The geographical areas analyzed in this piece report characteristics that are described in the conceptualization of *borderscape* (Brambilla, 2015; Krichker, 2021), a geographical area shaped by transnational flows that have existed and developed beyond the constructed idea of the national state and its clear-cut borders. Melilla and Ceuta, in addition, have often been conceptualized as *limboscapes* (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016; Ferrer-Gallardo & Espiñeira, 2015), areas where people's movement can be suspended or altered due to specific bordering practices (López- Sala & Godenau, 2024). Having analyzed the peculiarity of migrants' situation on the enclaves and the Canary Islands, we argue that *borderscape* and *limboscape* are terms that describe the Canary Islands as well as borders of Spain and the EU more generally: in fact, here as well many migrants find themselves stuck due to a condition of irregularity – forced into immobility.

These *borderscapes*, Spanish due to the empire's desire of conquest, extension and control over this region of northern Africa despite its distance from mainland Spain, have witnessed transnational movement that has been the very basis for their societies today. Melilla and Ceuta's colonial legacy plays a great role still today: the two enclaves have always reported a slightly more militarized approach given their function of *fronteras avanzadas* on African land, land fortress advanced into the African continent to defend Spain from Ottomans' conquests (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023; González-Páramo, 2021). The Canary Islands, on the other hand, represented, since the 15th century, a crucial stop on international trade

routes between the European continent and the Americas (Bosa, 2004; Fradejas-García & Loftsdóttir, 2024; Santana-Pérez, 2018). Territories where the Spanish presence can be seen as counter-intuitive considering its distance which has been deeply shaped by Spanish colonial interests and where transnational movement together with discrimination, disparity and imperialist violence has characterized life for centuries.

A multi-perspectival (Rumford 2012) approach to these borders allows us to analyze form of bordering that go beyond the physical: in this sense, the concept of *borderscape* is additionally useful because it allows us to underline how boundaries do not need to be visible to be effective by reflecting on ways physical and ideological/symbolical/cultural (non-physical) borders are set (Balibar, 2013). *Borderscapes* are surely physical but there are non-physical aspects to their existence that we find in both cases analyzed in similar and different ways. For example, evidence shows non-physical bordering manifesting through the hostility of the residents and institutional presence in these territories from residents' anti-immigration protests in the Canary Islands to the increasing presence of police forces in the last decade in already highly militarized Ceuta and Melilla (Aris Escarcena, 2022; Carr, 1997; Fradejas-García & Loftsdóttir, 2024; Queirolo Palmas, 2021). In addition to a climate of palpable tension, detachment from the people considered as 'immigrants' and violence, there are clear bureaucratic barriers for people of the move on these territories: many are the people that give up on regularization in both cases (Queirolo Palmas, 2021; Marino & Hategekimana 2025; Fradejas-García & Loftsdóttir, 2024). A recent study conducted by non-governmental organizations working on the ground in the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Melilla highlights lack of adequate information and advice; obstacles in obtaining documentation that prevent migrants from regularizing their situation; a lack of legal assistance and interpreters that hinder their understanding and exercise of their rights; as well as impediments to applying for international protection due to misinformation and administrative barriers (No Name Kitchen, El Taller-Frontera Sur Gran Canaria, Solidary Wheels, No Borders For Human Rights, 2025).

In Ceuta and Melilla, we reported instances of a specific hostility towards Moroccan nationals when trying to access the CETIs. Taking into consideration that it is from the CETIs that the regularization procedure starts (through which the migrants would be or not allowed to proceed to travel to mainland Spain) the people that cannot access these centers resort to the streets and to an irregular condition. This hostility created at the physical and non-physical levels is linked to an increasingly alarmist anti-immigration narrative shared in other EU member states and connected to what happens on their borders (Bello, 2022; Indenkleef, 2019). Narratives about border events are alarmist and representing disruptions as caused by migration on the border and criminalizing specific movement and people on the move in these territories (Bassi, 2018; Carr, 1997; Cuttitta, 2014; D'Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Diaferia, 2022; Marino et al., 2024; Pécoud, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite evidence showing that migration on these specific contexts might be used as scapegoat channeling other deeper issues of these territories with their conflictual history rich in injustices perpetrated by the supranational and [once-imperial and then] national powers in the region, civil society does not only report hostile behavior in these contexts. Civil society in general has been increasingly studied as a relevant if not key actor in migration governance especially in border contexts (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015; Calarco, 2024; Cuttitta et al., 2023). On these *borderscapes* as well, evidence shows that specific actors of the civil society (actors meant as both individuals and organizations) challenge an approach that sees migration as solely an issue and a disruption and in addition challenge the national and EU approach in their governance of migration (Fradejas-García & Loftsdóttir, 2024; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025). In particular, we see civil society actors transformed – by necessity – into mobility experts to challenge the migration governance in place that enforces detention and deportations together with the creation bureaucratic hurdles and evidence of racial profiling (Fradejas-García & Loftsdóttir, 2024; Marino & Hategekimana, 2025). We contend, supported by existing scholarship, their role in challenging the status quo of governance and aiding people on the move dealing with it is crucial and makes these actors – individuals and organizations – migration governance actors in their own right.

Having zoomed in to discuss civil society action at the local level, we conclude going back to a regional view. As we mentioned, these *borderscapes* have a peculiar geography which is counter-intuitive and contested by actors in the region. They represent Spain and the EU on African territory, which can be considered controversial – to say the least – by some local, regional and global political actors. Naturally, the relationship constructed with the national state of Morocco and in general the actions of Spanish, EU and Moroccan institutions have crucial implications for these EU territories beyond the EU. Through the examples such as the response to the Cayuco Crisis which took place in 2004 in the context of the Canary Islands, to the Ceuta so-called border crisis of 2021 and to the Melilla crossing of 2022 which resulted in the massacre of at least 23 people on the move with more than 70 still missing we see the involvement on these borders of actors beyond the Spanish national state.

In the case of the Cayuco Crisis, Spain looked for the support and collaboration of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, and launched the Africa Plan in order to involve the national state of West Africa and the Maghreb in the response to the events of 2006. Development projects started under the plan in Morocco, Mali and Senegal, but most importantly, in the name of stopping migration at its source Spain started through this plan the cooperation in the region to build capacity and provide equipment to implement border control through agreements that would allow Spanish Guardia Civil personnel in coastal regions of West Africa and the Maghreb to carry out patrols and gather information and connecting liaison officers from West Africa and the Maghreb with the Frontex office in Las Palmas

(Kemp, 2016). The Africa Plan made Spain, EU and West African powers on the coast collaborators, meaning Spain becoming dependent on these actors regarding the control of its borders.

Tight dependence on unpredictable non-democratic powers can be tricky, as the Ceuta so-called Moroccan-Spanish border incident proved in May 2021, when Morocco suddenly reduced the promised heavy militarization of its border due to its frustration at the Spanish government's decision to offer health assistance to Brahim Ghali, the head of the rebel Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement Polisario Front claiming Western Sahara against Moroccan control of the region (Reuters, 2021). In the same way, the cooperation in excessive violent border militarization is visible through the reported events of the Melilla massacre of June 2022 where evidence shows Moroccan police forces brutally attacking unarmed people on the move causing the death of many and Spanish forces allowing illegal pushbacks letting Moroccan forces on their soil to bring back migrants to Morocco at gun-point (Sapoch et al., 2022; Marino 2023). If these border events were not distressing enough, in July 2022, the EU agreed on a new partnership with the Kingdom of Morocco, an Anti-smuggling Operational Partnership (ASOP) to deal with irregular migration and criminal networks on the border (StateWatch, 2022; Marino, 2023). In this context, it is worthy underlining the Spanish government's additional collaboration with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, at the Ceuta border through Joint Operation Minerva, which takes place every year during the summer months with the goal of assisting Spanish authorities in border control, "support border checks in the Spanish ports of Algeciras, Tarifa and Ceuta, which are handling summer passenger traffic to and from Morocco" (Frontex, 2022).

These instances show how involved the EU, its member states and its agencies are – in addition to Spain as a power involved at the border due to its geography – in the strengthening of the militarization and securitization of the border in a violent and aggressive way. The implications of the EU and Spanish collaboration with third states such as the Kingdom of Morocco show how the human rights of people on the move are put in danger due to the very choices in governance of democratic states of the EU, a supranational power that likes to present itself as founded on the values of human dignity, equality, rule of law and human rights, amongst others.

Discussion and Conclusion

This piece has presented the case of 'European borders beyond Europe' under the jurisdiction of the national-state of Spain and has carried out a comparative analysis of these borderlands to advance a specific argument: these *borderscapes*, EU borders beyond geographical Europe, are utilized by Spain and the EU as territories where they can continue experimenting a perpetrated migration management based on securitization, militarization and externalization. Such governance has been defined as effective by Frontex in 2024, which declared that crossings from January to November 2024 fell 40 percent overall, including a noteworthy decrease in crossing from the borderlands of Ceuta and Melilla (Aljazeera, 2025;

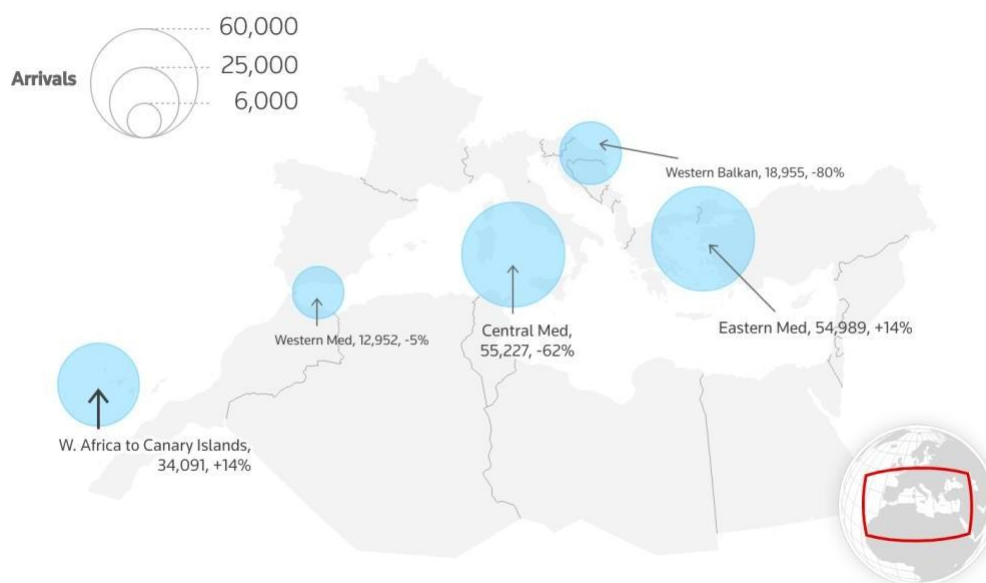
Espinosa, 2025). However, we contend that it will have long- lasting damaging consequences not only when looking at the human cost paid by people on the move (as we can see through the occurrence of humanitarian crises and massacres), but also for these territories' residents and, as a result, for the very member state of Spain and the EU as a whole.

Data has shown how securitizing borders does not stop people on the move from initiating their journeys, but rather forces them to look for alternative routes and ways to cross borders (Shah, 2020). Spain and the EU have been increasingly investing into strengthening cooperation with Morocco on migration through a. the implementation of the EU Trust Fund devoting a total of €234 million (from 2015 to 2025) towards “integrated border management and fight against smuggling and trafficking in human beings, protection and community stabilization, support to labor migration and to improved migration governance and assisted voluntary returns” (European Commission, 2023), b. the more recent €152 million cooperation comprehensive program aimed at “strengthening Morocco's border management actions” (European Commission, 2023) and c. Spanish €30 million package for migration control purposes agreed to be sent to Morocco in October 2022 (Statewatch, 2022). Despite these increased efforts in effectively externalize EU borders and their control making them more securitized, militarized and consequently dangerous for people on the move, the example of the Canary Islands show how securitizing specific routes will make people on the move try to cross alternative, more dangerous routes: the vast majority of migrants that arrived in Spain in 2024 arrived through the Atlantic Archipelago with crossing growing 19 percent on the Atlantic route (Aljazeera, 2025). Externalization and securitization of specific Spanish borders through cooperation with Morocco and Frontex have forced people on the move to opt for the more dangerous, perilous routes of the Atlantic.

Figure 2: Graph indicating the increase of immigration to the Canary Islands and the decrease of people trying to cross through the western and central Mediterranean routes

Irregular migration to southern Europe

January-October 2024 vs same period of 2023



By Andrei Khalip • Source: EU border agency FRONTEX

While Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has envisioned a future where the Spanish migration governance could set an international and regional example in the protection of human rights and strengthening of the nation system of reception and integration (La Moncloa 2024), when analyzing the border, reality seems quite far from this hopeful discourse. We see a clear trend shared at the EU level when looking at the management of borders and Spain seems to have jumped on this trend quite comfortably. Firstly, these borderlands have been transformed into *limboscap*es (Ferrer-Gallardo and Albet-Mas 2016; Ferrer-Gallardo and Espiñeira 2015), areas where border infrastructure excludes people on the move both through institutional and physical borders making these *borderscap*es places in between: people on the move on *borderscap*es are neither included nor excluded rather immobilized in the ‘in between’.

The Canary Islands and Ceuta and Melilla as *borderscap*es have a specific geography that makes it easier for Spanish and EU border management to carry through a migration governance of exclusion and immobilization of people on the move, a governance based on the securitization and externalization of borders. We witness clear gaps in migration governance offered by the state and the EU beyond border controls: NGOs working on the ground in the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Melilla have shown evidence of lack of adequate reception of people on the move and the several obstacles people on the move have to go through to obtain specific documentation to regularize. In this tense and securitized context, due to the

absence of national and EU institutions, NGOs take here a role of actual migration governance actors. Societies at these borders have already increasingly shown the consequences of such a securitized approach only involved in border control and not investing in border societies life and development beyond the border. Lastly, externalizing control to third states and collaboration with Frontex have shown the high risk of the implementation of illegal pushbacks on these borders. While it is already evident that people on the move's human rights have been under threat through the implementation of such governance, the argument presented here is that this border control approach will end up damaging border societies, border countries and consequently the EU as a regional power whose so-defined 'pragmatic approach' in migration governance has proved to be nothing but pragmatic especially when looking at these peculiar borders.

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Empirical Article V

Framing Migration and Migrants Through Border Crises: The Case of Ceuta and Melilla

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyze the framing of migration and migrants, reflecting on the relevance of specific disruptive episodes in the border context of Ceuta and Melilla, which divides Spain (and Europe) and Morocco (and Africa). We conduct framing analysis quantitatively and qualitatively, developing a specific mixed-method approach which allows us to show how specific episodes impact frames with the potential of building specific narratives by actors at regional (EU level), national, and local levels. The analyzed borderlands present – at least – two lexical borders: one that is managerial and enhances the bureaucratization of migration as a process, thus *invisibilizing* the human aspect in the category of migrant; and another that is humanitarian, often challenging the bureaucratic approach by emphasizing the human side of migration. We argue that independent and activist organizations (IAOs), part of civil society, bring forward a humanitarian border through principled pragmatism. Representatives of the selected IAOs underline the worth of a pragmatic approach informed by the lived reality where a more humanitarian lexical border would be in line with principles and respond to ethical concerns while also being instrumental to the border-lands' growth.

Keywords

Border crises, migration framing, migration governance, civil society, principled pragmatism

Introduction

The connection between disruptive events and the movement of people towards the European continent has become increasingly present in narratives framing migration (Dines et al., 2018; Fröhlich, 2017). In this context, the framing of migration has been mainly analyzed in the media and narratives of powerful policy-making actors. These analyses report extensive evidence of the presence of a prominent narrative of securitization, linked to negative and alarmist frames of migration and which translates into specific securitized practices (D'Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Randy S. Clemons et al., 2020). Narratives and practices around human mobility towards

the European continent have been “crisified”, and “crisis thinking” in relation to migration has become something structural in the EU and its migration governance (Geddes, 2019), especially when looking at EU borders and locations where the hotspot approach was implemented (Moreno-Lax, 2024).

Reflecting on the evidence of narratives of migration connected to crisis and its implications for the “crisification” of migration, we investigate the framing of migration and people on the move on specific EU borders, the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. The autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla are peculiar borders of Spain and the EU: Spanish territories contested by Morocco and defined as *fronteras avanzadas*—Spanish advanced borders on African territories—or “doors to the European Fortress”, they have often been described as “juridical limbos”, “nobody’s lands”, and “cage cities” (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023). These are territories where border isolation translates into political isolation, making the two enclaves bridgeheads that must deal with social, administrative and humanitarian aspects of migratory flows—often by themselves (Ribas, 2015). Examining the framing of migration and people on the move in such peculiar border contexts contributes to the study of the implications of this framing for other European borders and for non-physical forms of societal bordering (Brambilla, 2015; Krichker, 2021). The border itself thus shapes bordering imaginaries and processes beyond the borderland.

Our aim is to investigate the framing of migration and trace a chronology of this framing through specific moments of crisis, thus highlighting how human mobility is referred to in relation to these disruptive moments. The objective is here to clearly show the impact of moments of claimed crisis on such frames. We argue that it is in these moments that tensions amongst and between diverse narratives of social phenomena, such as human mobility, arise. It is, thus, crucial to identify who defines them and how to grasp the potential impact of disruption narratives on bordering processes starting at the borderland. Powerful political actors and civil society, in fact, do not simply observe the moment of crisis. Rather, they act to define the moment and the very nature of the disruption, often by providing different terms to describe it: once the disruption has taken place, we see a competition for the definition of what the disruption is and different views of what returning to normalcy would entail.

Our objective is to trace frames by national and regional (EU) actors who are active on the border. We thus explore framing by actors such as municipalities of the autonomous cities (local and national level), national police forces and the border and coast guard agency at the European level, Frontex. In addition, drawing on studies on the importance of the inclusion of civil society to bring forward diverse perspectives on social phenomena and policy responses

(Cichowski, 2010; Fraser, 2019; Lacatus, 2023; Sariola et al., 2019), we underline the role of independent activist organizations (IAOs), part of these borderlands' civil societies. We look at these novel organizations as they define themselves, i.e. non-governmental organizations beyond [or outside] the mainstream. They are not mainstream in terms of structure and geographical scope as they are organized and meant to act locally. They also report a strong focus on financial independence and their freedom to be activist while working on the border—they are not financed by any third party and their funds consist of private donations. This specific focus sheds light on an under-researched aspect of migration studies, providing a fresh perspective on the topic (Calarco, 2023).

We analyze how migration and migrants are framed throughout specific moments of crisis which were highly mediatized at the national and European levels, namely the Moroccan-Spanish incident on May 16, 2021, and the massacre of Melilla on June 24, 2022. Our research employs a comprehensive approach, starting with an inductive computational framing analysis—combining it with a qualitative analysis of the frames found in the text—of selected actors' press releases, reports, briefings, and blog pieces. Through our analysis we find evidence for the existence of two lexical borders. We define one of them as “managerial,” as it points to a bureaucratization of migration, thus emphasizing the procedures surrounding the management of movement on the border that tend to ignore and *invisibilize*—render invisible—the human migrant. The other lexical border is what we define as “humanitarian,” openly challenging the bureaucratic approach and stressing the human side of migration. The latter is prioritized by actors who are set to reflect on ethical questions and evaluate the national and EU management of migration.

We triangulate our findings, zooming into the perspective of three civil society organizations (CSOs)—that we define as independent activist organizations (IAOs). These organizations have a relevant role in the governance of migration, particularly by bringing forward and reflecting on ethical questions. We argue that these organizations advance a perspective of principled pragmatism. While they believe that practice must be guided by specific principles, they weigh up relative advantages and disadvantages of a specific practice by reference to how these principles can best operate in a specific context (Jackson & Brunger, 2015) in this case, the border context. Principled pragmatism has been employed in the analysis of narratives and practices brought forward by the European Union in different fields. However, studies have also shown how EU governance often does not seem either principled (Bremberg, 2020; Jackson & Brunger, 2015; Winn & Gänzle, 2023) nor pragmatic (Börzel, 2016;

Cusumano & Riddervold, 2023; Lavenex, 2018). We argue that these IAOs bring forward a more tangible principled pragmatism without explicitly labelling their approach as such.

The paper starts by presenting existing relevant research on the framing of migration and migrants, advancing the case for the study of such frames in specific border contexts. It continues reflecting on the conceptualization of “moments of crisis”, which we refer to as “claimed crisis”, drawing on Marino and Ruedin (2023) conceptualization. Moments of crisis are specific events that guide our quantitative framing analysis which aims to show the impact of these disruptive events and how they are presented on the framing of migration and migrants at the border. The paper then presents the relevance of the role of civil society connected to its aim to highlight narratives of specific key civil society actors. Lastly, we proceed to present our findings and discuss them: in addition to discuss the impact of moments of claimed crisis on narratives on the border we present how Ceuta and Melilla represent (i) a lexical border we define as managerial which enhances the bureaucratization of migration as a process, thus *invisibilizing* the human aspect in the category of migrant; (ii) a humanitarian border challenging the bureaucratic approach by emphasizing the human side of migration brought forward by (iii) independent and activist organizations (IAOs), part of civil society, through an approach embedded in principled pragmatism. The novelty of our approach does not only consist in the methodology (mixed-method approach) used to get to the heart of specific frames used by specific actors, but also on showing how disruptive events can have a distinct impact on these frames. In addition, the focus on IAOs as actors of civil society is novel and we contend extremely needed: we argue that these organizations play an extremely important role in shaping migration narratives on the border—which might have an impact beyond the border—and need to be studied further both in respect to their narratives and practices.

Framing migration and migrants

Frames have often been put in relation to narratives and the two concepts are at times used interchangeably in the literature. However, the key difference between narratives and frames turns out to be on the respective scale level: frames are actors’ perspectives on social phenomena (Aukes et al., 2020). As we need perspectives to shape a narrative, frames build up specific narratives—the stories told about social phenomena. Narratives need to be plausible, stable and capable of effectively presenting—in a sequence—ideas that might be complex, charged normatively or emotionally (Boswell et al., 2011). Furthermore, narratives can advance specific claims, assertions that are based on a story and that are normatively charged in the sense that they report what is believed to be good or bad, right or wrong (Marino & Ruedin, 2023).

The analysis of migration has seen the concept of narrative being applied extensively. Research has investigated how mainstream media outlets' representation has a significant contribution to the creation of narratives of migration and migrants that are widely socially shared (Bello, 2022; Valente et al., 2021). Research has shown that governments and institutions in the European context hold information campaigns employing both enemy and hero framing through a strategic emotional and dramatic media narrative, stressing the danger of migrating to Europe and depicting the worthiness of those staying in their countries of origin (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020). The presence of a prominent narrative claiming the need for border securitization, linked to the negative and alarmist frames of migration and to the framing of the migrant as enemy, has also been extensively analyzed by the literature, focusing on national and supranational cases (Casaglia & Coletti, 2023; Mountz & Hiemstra, 2014).

Securitization narratives of migration highlight the importance of borders and identity—both referring to the nation-state and the European continent as a whole (Agnew & Shin, 2019; Kaufmann, 2018). It is not surprising that threats at the border have been a key narrative employed by populist political actors (Casaglia & Coletti, 2023; Kaufmann, 2018). We see how migration and migrants at the border have been analyzed mainly through their broader relation to a nation-state. As a result, most of these studies have focused on claims advanced by powerful media outlets and policy actors in the context of a specific nation-state and/or have carried out comparative analyses of nation-states or supra-national organizations driven by national interests when it comes to migration narratives and policies. As we focus on the border context, we shall posit that there is a gap in the analysis of narratives of migration and migrants and claims advanced through these narratives. Considering the border an object of study in its own right (Rumford, 2012) allows us to examine national and supranational (EU level in this case) actors whose field of action encompasses this border context while considering the broader implications at the local, national, regional, and supranational levels.

Moments of 'claimed crisis': why are they relevant?

Crisis permeates our lives, even if its conceptualization has been proven to be a daunting process. Crises can be conceptualized as disruptive events that lead to threatening situations which drastically change normalcy in place (McConnell, 2020). They are veritable turning points with the potential to change society or governance by disrupting normalcy and creating opportunities (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014; Habermas, 1976; Koselleck & Richter, 2006; Oesch et al., 2023). Scholarship has looked at crisis in relation to narratives and practices around migration, under- lining how it has been used strategically, especially when looking at EU border management where a process of "crisification" (Geddes, 2019; Moreno-Lax, 2024) has

been carried out to normalize exceptions in governance. Crisis is then used in a performative way as it “produces specific dis- positions that justify [and normalize] exceptional measures” (Moreno-Lax, 2024, p. 185). The argument for a process “crisification”—of structuralizing crisis—is surely persuasive; however, we believe, it can only be fully analytically useful once we shed light and define “crisis” more precisely. Crises are fundamentally “claims”. These claims, advanced by specific actors, posit that the difference between what is (status quo) and what should be (normative charged statement) is unacceptably large and urgent action is needed to address a disruptive situation (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). Understanding a crisis as a claim does not deny a disruptive event but rather highlights the need for a claim to be made for a disruptive event to become a crisis. Claiming a crisis is prescriptive—it urges that something must be done regarding that specific situation that is claimed as a crisis. The systematization and structurization of such claims produce a process of “crisification”. However, it is important to underline that diverse claims regarding a specific disruptive event can exist and be in tension with one another—as they originate from specific perspectives (frames) of a disruptive event and are presented through diverse actors’ narratives. As a result, while it is relevant to focus on the structurization of a specific crisis claim, it is also important to keep in mind (and in the research scope) that there might be actors (claim-makers or claim-receivers) challenging a specific crisis claim—which might have implications for the process of “crisification”.

This conceptualization of crisis is instrumental in shedding light on the qualitative description (the adjectives)—related to a disruptive event—advanced by diverse actors with different perspectives. We contend that disruptive events whose claim to be crises is widely accepted shape the framing of migration and migrants. In these moments claimed as crises, change is expected, and opportunities are created. It is in these moments of tension that different frames—creating more structured narratives—of social phenomena might encounter, compete, unite and shape each other, creating potential new understandings and alternative perspectives on those phenomena and on the claimed crises themselves.

The role of civil society

Diverse actors create narratives and make claims around social phenomena. While claiming a crisis and the disruption’s qualitative type, powerful policy-making actors also advance claims on the needed response and the governance towards a specific disrupting event (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). Although research on entities connected to national and supranational actors has predominated the academic debate, a strand of literature has focused more recently on the role of civil society—more specifically, non-governmental, non-state and non-market actors—taking part in shaping the understanding of social phenomena and the governance around them.

Civil society is defined in the existing literature as “the web of activities and organizations that are not created by the state or by its articulations and are not directly controlled by it” (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015, p. 104). Civil society—and social activism within it—has been considered instrumental in the fight for social justice, the advancement of human rights and the implementation of human rights law. Examples of this range from civil society support in domestically implementing international human rights law to civil society and social activists playing a role in setting human rights as a priority in peace negotiation processes and in the creation and implementation of human rights conventions such as the European Court of Human rights (ECtHR) (Cichowski, 2010; Fraser, 2019; Lacatus, 2023; Sariola et al., 2019).

More specifically, research has recently investigated the role of civil society in human rights narratives and implementation vis-à-vis policies around migration (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015) and on European borderlands (Cuttitta et al., 2023; El Qadim et al., 2021). The role of CSOs in migration narratives and governance has been analyzed in strict relation to supra- and inter-governmental organizations, such as the EU (Lavenex, 2016). In addition, humanitarian organizations have been analyzed through their interactions with border control, creating conceptualizations such as “humanitarian border” and investigating the entanglement between humanitarian work, migration and border management (Gerard & Weber, 2019). Research has, furthermore, shed light on the complex role of civil society, with organizations that while seemingly in opposition through their claims and actions to state actors, take part in border management, “working in a continuum of practices on the border”. Civil society has been mostly perceived as being partially in opposition, but ultimately dependent, on the border governance instituted by supra- and national actors. While we agree that these border actors work together in a so-defined preach-practice “continuum”, we analyze the role of CSOs, distancing ourselves from an approach that sees them as predominantly passive and dependent on border management to take in their agency and specific strategies vis-à-vis their role as claim-makers within migration narratives.

In particular, within civil society, we focus on the framing by local (born and based in Ceuta and Melilla) IAOs—linked to social activism—which, we contend, have more leverage and flexibility to reflect on ethical concerns on the border rather than strictly legal and managerial considerations. IAOs present alternative perspectives as opposed to the current legitimized and recognized ones to which other dependent actors adhere and whose governance implications they must follow when it comes to framing and governing migration on the border.

We want to shed light on financially and ideologically independent IAOs who list social justice, respect, and the implementation of human rights as their principal mission and vision.

There is a growing recognition—even by states themselves—of the need to involve non-state actors in migration and border governance and, as a result, civil society has more recently been called upon to assist state actors in protecting migrants (Cuttitta et al., 2023). In addition, we want to convey a specific local perspective reporting narratives of migration and migrants by part of civil society that is not only defined as activist and independent but also local, meaning social activism born and based in the border context. The focus on such a local perspective, we argue, can give us important insights on the process of understanding the border in its own right—with its specific local activist organizations.

The context

Looking at the autonomous cities more in detail, Ceuta, covering an area of 18.5 km and separated from the province Cádiz by only 17 km, is a city of 85.000 inhabitants, with a very peculiar, secluded geography which made it a chosen location as city-prison (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016). Melilla, smaller in size covering an area of 12 km, is a city of 86.000 inhabitants (Páramo, 2021). Ceuta has been defined as *limboscape* (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016), namely a space where people on the move's trajectories towards the European continent are spatially and temporally suspended: this analysis is relevant for Melilla as well as the two cities present numerous peculiarities and many studies investigate them together as constituting the Spanish border on African soil (Briones Gómez et al., 2013; Ferrer Gallardo, 2008; Gold, 2000). The two cities constitute borderlands that are peculiar for a number of reasons, first of which their contested nature. Morocco has never recognized Spanish sovereignty over Melilla and Ceuta; and, since 1975—end of Francoism—the situation of these enclaves has remained an unsolved colonial issue.¹⁸ With Spain entering the European Economic Community in 1986, it began reforming its immigration laws as the territories became EU's enclaves on the African continent (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023; Ribas, 2015). After 1987, the majority of the cities' Muslim residents—as they were constantly denied joining the national state—became formally stateless (Karell, 2015). Since then, Spanish borders have gone through a process of re-bordering addressing two dimensions: one bilateral (national) and one communitarian (European), accentuated by Schengen (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023).

¹⁸ Since the 15th century, Ceuta and Melilla have been governed by the Spanish state. While they were considered part of a mainland province until 1995, their residents have always been peripheral to the mainland. These territories' dominant group (*crístianos*, Christians) clearly shared religious, linguistic, phenotype and political bonds with the mainland and were mainly in the two cities because of military duties, involvement in the colonization's process or in frontier trade activities (Colón, 2008; Karell, 2015). These territories' other major group (*musulmanes*, Muslims) have always been marginalised from the mainland, Spain, facing specific ethno-culturally based restrictions throughout the centuries (Briones Gómez et al., 2013).

Ceuta and Melilla, with their history of *fronteras avanzadas*, are still perceived as a second border used to externalize Spanish and EU borders. In addition, the *fronteras avanzadas* are also present in the ongoing cooperation with Morocco, which receives financial support from Spain and the EU to keep migrants away from their borders (Jones et al., 2022). In Ceuta and Melilla, we find what we can define as a “non-physical *frontera avanzada*”, a concept referring to the border’s extension beyond its physical location, encompassing the cooperation between Spain, the EU, and Morocco in migration and border control. This “non-physical *frontera avanzada*” is a key aspect of the Ceuta and Melilla border situation, highlighting the complex and multi-faceted nature of these territories’ relationship with the EU and Morocco.

These borderlands are isolated territories. They represent an asymmetric, multidimensional and conflictual border. “Asymmetric” because, with their colonial legacy, these frontiers re-enact and perform an economic, cultural and historical-political disparity; “multidimensional” due to the different levels and actors involved in the governance and the very existence of these borders; and “conflictual” as a multidimensional border characterized by disparity and inequalities (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023; Páramo, 2021).

Moreover, Europeanization and the implementation of Schengen transformed these borders into the borders of the European Union. The implication of this shift was the creation of an increasingly securitized border between Spain and Morocco, enhancing the construction of an image of “European Fortress” (Engelbert et al., 2019). A process of securitization of the Spanish—now EU—Moroccan border started in the early 90s with the cooperation of Morocco which since the early 2000s increasingly adopts repressive measures against anyone trying to cross the border or helping people to do so. In particular in the year 2005, Moroccan police forces unleashed unprecedented violence in raiding migrants’ camps near Ceuta and in detaining and deporting migrants. To this day, despite not recognizing these territories as Spanish, Morocco continues this collaboration with Spain and the EU regarding border controls due to concerns regarding border crime and “irregular” migration (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023)—however, as we will see, not without a few hiccups.

The isolation and extra-continentiality of these borders together with their legacies of colonialism and marginalization and rights’ denial of a specific section of their population make these territories a compelling case study for the movement on European borders in constant construction and development. We investigate the framing of migration and migrants in a specific time context: from May 2021, month that marked the increasing deterioration of Moroccan-Spanish diplomatic relations—until February 2023, month that witnessed the occurrence of a high-level meeting between Spain and Morocco, aimed at solidifying the new

stage of bilateral relations between the two countries. Over these two years, characterized by two highly mediatized events—the Moroccan-Spanish incident on May 16, 2021, and the massacre of Melilla on June 24, 2022—we outline a chronology of the framing of migration and migrants. During the so-defined Morocco-Spain border incident, an estimated number of 8,000 migrants crossed into the territory from Morocco to Ceuta over 36 h. The crossing was possible due to a reduction of the usual heavy militarization of the coasts by Moroccan authorities (Reuters, 2021).¹⁹ Melilla, on the other hand, witnessed the events of the 24th of June 2022, when at the abandoned border crossing Barrio Chino, Moroccan police brutally attacked migrants attempting to cross to Spain. The reason for the choice of these recent crises on the border lies in the high mediatization of these specific events reported by many international media recognized by and shared to a broader audience as “crises” (Bremner, 2023; Reuters, 2021). The amount of attention reserved for the enclaves regarding these specific events were reported as well by the people working on the border (exploratory prompts in interviews with the representatives of IAOs). These moments of disruption also coincide with a specific strategy of “crisification” implemented both at the EU and national levels where we see much more complicity and collaboration between Spain and Morocco (and dependence on Morocco) and securitization and militarization of such borders in the name of claimed crises. Nevertheless, while there seem to be a—at least mediatic consensus—in defining these events as disruptive on the border, our findings reveal how different actors’ narratives are differently impacted by these events based on how they perceive and narrate them.

Methods of data collection and analysis

To trace the framing of migration and migrants within the chosen time frame, we collected documents (n = 223) written from May 2021 to February 2023, to be found in the databases of eight actors²⁰ which, we argue, represent the European, national and local level of the border. The documents’ type ranges from reports and press releases to news and blog pieces.²¹ In

¹⁹ This reduction in the heavy militarization was supposedly the result of Rabat’s frustration at the Spanish government decision to host and offer health assistance to Brahim Ghali, leader of Western Sahara (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic). Ghali is the head of the Polisario Front, rebel Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement claiming Western Sahara against Moroccan control of the region (Reuters, 2021).

²⁰ The actors whose databases were consulted are the Policía Nacional, the Guardia Civil, the Ciudad Autónoma de Ceuta, the Ciudad Autónoma de Melilla, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), No Name Kitchen and Asociación Elin based in Ceuta and Solidary Wheels in Melilla. We chose actors that, we argue, could efficiently represent the local, national and EU levels in migration governance on these specific borders. We wanted the local (IAOs and municipalities), the national (Policía Nacional and Guardia Civil) and the EU (Frontex) levels to be represented in our sample as we believe these are also the most influential and powerful actors on the specific borders whose narratives have tangible practical implications.

²¹ Documents were retrieved manually on the actors’ databases using the following keywords “migration, migrant, borders, Morocco” – and in their Spanish translation, “in-migración, in-migrante, frontera, Marruecos”. To ensure a comprehensive data collection, we also consulted the databases of the Spanish police, the Guardia Civil

addition, to zoom in on what we define an alternative framing of migration and migrants on these borders, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews ($n = 5$) with the representatives of three IAOs, No Name Kitchen and Asociación Elin in Ceuta, and Solidary Wheels in Melilla.²² In the initial segment of our analysis, we employ topic modeling, a text mining technique that categorizes texts into distinct themes based on their content similarity. Specifically, we use structural topic modeling (STM), a probabilistic method incorporating metadata such as document date or author into thematic partitioning (Roberts et al., 2019). Probabilistic topic modeling uncovers hidden themes within documents by assuming that documents are mixtures of topics with corresponding word distributions.

To inductively investigate frames in the documents, we established a model of twenty topics based on semantic coherence²³ and exclusivity score²⁴. Furthermore, we aggregated these topics into three frames using observation of word scores like highest probability, FREX²⁵, and Lift²⁶. The purposeful grouping into frames aimed to capture broader thematic structures within the data, enabling an analysis that considers temporal dynamics and author influences on frame prevalence. This approach allowed us to trace thematic emphasis evolution over time and authors, offering insights into shifting discourse patterns captured in the documents. Using the STM's framework, we conducted a regression analysis to investigate the relationship between our covariates (time and authorship) and frame prevalence.

The initial stages of our analysis predominantly focused on descriptive exploration. Using a battery of tests and based on the granularity principle we chose 20 topics that we

and Frontex, and - as these actors are present and active in several [border] contexts - added the two additional keywords "Ceuta, Melilla" in the process.

²² No Name Kitchen is a non-governmental organization, grassroots movement operating across the Balkans, Mediterranean and Sahel routes. NNN operates on the border by giving medical care, providing food and clothes, legal support and reporting of abuses. Asociación Elin is a non-profit and humanitarian organization which promotes interculturality and develops a growing diverse community on the border. Solidary Wheels is a non-profit organization of independent volunteers aiming at promoting a dignified life for people on the move on the border.

²³ Semantic coherence evaluates how closely the most relevant terms in a given topic are interconnected within the documents under examination. It is quantified through the logarithmic ratio of the co-occurrence count and the individual term frequency. A higher semantic coherence score indicates a stronger meaningfulness and interpretability of the topic terms.

²⁴ Exclusivity assesses how distinctively unique the words are to a particular topic, contrasted with other topics. It is calculated based on the proportion of a term's probability within a specific topic in comparison to the summed probabilities of all topics. A greater exclusivity score implies more specific and significant topic terms.

²⁵ FREX (Frequency and Exclusivity) strikes a balance between frequency and exclusivity by employing the weighted harmonic mean. It ranks words according to their exclusivity and frequency within the topic. A higher FREX score signifies more pertinent and representative terms for the topic at hand.

²⁶ Lift represents the ratio of a term's probability within a specific topic divided by its marginal probability across the entire corpus. Similar to exclusivity, lift evaluates enrichment and informativeness of the terms within a topic without normalizing by the number of topics. A higher lift score suggests a more informative and evocative presence of the topic terms.

grouped in 3 frames: a) a security frame b) an administrative frame and c) a migrant rights frame. We analyzed the documents qualitatively to verify how the mentioned terms were precisely used in relation to a broader set of text—specific statements.²⁷ With little surprise, our analysis brings evidence of IAOs' documents presenting a higher proportion of migrant rights frame whereas Melilla and Ceuta municipalities' documents present more around the administrative frame. The Spanish Policia Nacional, Guardia Civil and Frontex present more terms related to the security frame. Given the nature of the institutions selected, the proportion of terms related to each framework is what we would expect.

Nevertheless, analyzing the selected documents more in depth allowed us to understand better how frames develop through time—in specific moments of crisis—and how they articulate with other terms in the statements in the documents presenting specific claims in describing migration and migrants. Our mixed method approach allowed us to qualitatively look at how specific terms were used in a broader statement that created a claim.

The impact of moments of claimed crisis

This section presents our analysis of the development of frames through time with a specific focus on the changes through the moments of claimed crisis and the time around these claimed crises. Firstly, it is important to underline that although both these crises were highly mediatized, the Morocco-Spain incident saw an increase in the use of administrative and security frames just after the event. We also see a slight increase of the migrant rights frame due to the peculiar use of terms related to such frame by some institutional actors – a point we will outline in the next section. When looking at the period concerning the crisis represented by the Melilla massacre, it is surprising to notice that the crisis is not as claimed—compared with the events of 2021. The crisis is not mentioned as an incident by institutional actors at the national and European levels. Most documents claiming the event as a crisis (specifically a humanitarian crisis, a massacre) were written by IAOs. As a result, institutional actors do not seem to recognize this event as a crisis, especially when comparing this specific narrative with the one following the 2021 disruptions in Ceuta, where the use of frames was increasing, as did the mention of the crisis in the documents by institutional actors.

²⁷ Regression analysis allowed us to overcome a challenge in our documents' investigation related to greater number of policy-making documents from the two municipalities' databases. We noted, in fact, a difficulty in discerning differences between thematic distributions over time due to the numerical dominance of the municipalities' bulletins in our database. By accounting for the influence of confounding factors and isolating the unique contributions of covariates to each thematic frame, regression analysis enabled us to gain a clearer understanding of their interplay throughout the specified period of time, despite having a majority of a specific type of document in our database (i.e., decision-making bulletins).

Terms related to the administrative and security frames increased just after May 2021 and decreased just after June 2022, indicating how differently these two events were reported and how this impacted the narrative on migration and migrants which decreased in presence after June 2022 while was highly discussed after May 2021. Surprisingly, Policia Nacional used a slightly less securitized narrative than usual (decrease in security frame and terms related to the migrant rights frame) when confronted with the first claimed crisis: after a stabilizing period, we see again an increase of terms related to the security frame. Here, as well, after June 2022, we see an additional decrease in each frame due to the lack of documents mentioning the crisis at all. After the events of May 2021, we witnessed the increase of terms related to the security frame in the documents of the Guardia Civil. The same frame stabilizes and remains stable through the period just after the Melilla massacre: in this case, we also see a decrease in documents related to migration and migrants just after the 24th of June 2022. Investigating Frontex's narrative, we notice that terms related to the administrative and migrant rights frames slightly increase when referring to the border control partnership with Spain. The security frame remains dominant in Frontex's narratives, increasing after May 2021 and remaining stable after June 2022, which aligns with the approach of the Spanish Guardia Civil.

When examining the influence of these moments of claimed crisis on IAOs' narratives, it becomes evident that both events lead to an increase in narratives about migration and migrants. However, it is also crucial to recognize that the way these organizations discuss migration and migrants remains quantitatively more consistent and coherent over the period - compared to the rest of the actors analyzed. We observe an increase in the publication of documents by Solidary Wheels after the Mellilla massacre of 2022, which can be attributed to the organization's location (based in Melilla as the events unfolded). When we scrutinize the IAO narratives, we find a consistent use of framing over the time period. This consistency, as later confirmed through interviews, underscores the belief of these actors that disruption is a border constant and is thus portrayed as such.

The managerial border

Frames found in the analyzed documents came to build up specific narratives on the border. Terms related to the security and administrative frame construct a narrative of migration as a process and report specific responses (governance) to the process. More specifically, the administrative frame reports terms related to policies in place when it comes to migration in the specific autonomous cities, to procedures regarding subventions and special resolutions. From May 2021—month of the Morocco-Spain border incident—to July 2021, the municipalities of Ceuta and Melilla collectively account for over half of publications related to the lexical

managerial border, with most documents directly linked to the incident on the border. Few documents speak directly of the event, but several refer to its consequences—mainly the arrival of large numbers of people in the city—of Ceuta. Ceuta and Melilla describe the incident using terminology related to an incident caused by negligence, such as black episode, invasion, flood, problem and avalanche.²⁸

Documents that present the administrative frame as dominant were, as expected, mainly written by the municipalities of Ceuta and Melilla. However, Ceuta and Melilla slightly differ in their approach, even if sharing policy interests and a dominant administrative frame. The municipality of Melilla, while presenting a dominant administrative frame around the selected moments of disruption, reports discussions around the application of projects in which migrants are not addressed directly but as part of a wider beneficiary group. In most documents, the municipality of Melilla focuses on migration as an administrative challenge. Melilla's strategic role at the European border is also reported as related to the disruptive moments, discussing migration through logistical concerns.

In these specific moments of disruption, while the dominant frame remains administrative, Melilla's bulletins highlight the need for European Union representation and support, including funding for projects aimed at aiding socially disadvantaged minors, many of whom are migrants. This portrayal underscores a managerial perspective, perceiving migration through the lens of social and administrative obligations, but also occasionally reports some characteristics of migrants as part of a vulnerable group. On the other hand, documents from the municipality of Ceuta include more terms related to the security frame while still presenting a dominant administrative frame. Migrants are explicitly framed as “problem” requiring administrative solutions and it is advanced the concern regarding Ceuta becoming a center for illegal immigration.

²⁸ The administrative and security frame are prevalent in the lexical border that we define as managerial. However, this does not mean that they are not two different frames each with specific terms that come to identify them. The security frame reports terms that refer to illegality, criminality, calling for the response from police forces or the military, while the administrative frame reports terms that refer to managing movement and disruptions on the border without referring to potential illegal and criminal activities. For example, referring to migration movements as ‘floods’ is using a term pertinent to a natural disaster: floods are not crimes or illegal activities but rather disasters, terrible accidents. We argue that while the use of the term ‘flood’ removes the human in human mobility, it does not securitize it to the extent that something criminal has been committed. ‘Flood’, despite clearly having an alarmist potential, does not have the criminal connotation that ‘illegal crossing’ has. Given this, there are surely terms that result to be more ambiguous than others: invasion for example can be at times used to give an alarmist perspective on the amount of people on the move on the border, but can also retain the connotation of something done against the law (i.e., invading a country). Here a visualization we created to show how far or close specific terms are to a specific frame showing how there might be terms that are more ambiguous than others; however, this does not justify the incorporation of two frames in one as there are terms that are specific to only one frame.

Indeed, terms that are more closely associated with the security frame put migration in relation to illegal movement, so they conceive the entirety of movement through the lens of potential illegality. As expected, documents written by the Policia Nacional, the Guardia Civil, and Frontex mainly present terms related to the security frame. Interestingly, a closer look into documents published in the aftermath of the Morocco-Spain border incident reveals a higher proportion of terms related to the migrant rights frame in documents published by the Policia Nacional: for example, documents narrate the rescue of two young girls among migrants entering Ceuta, emphasizing police efforts to reunite them with their mother.

This portrayal highlights the vulnerability of these specific migrants, defined as children, and the compassionate police response to their plight. While the security frame remains predominant and tends to increase during these specific moments of disruption, we also find instances of terms related to the migrant rights frame very soon after the disruptive event has taken place. It is important to underline that the documents reporting the migrant rights frame were published shortly after the Morocco-Spain border incident and describe the vulnerability and conditions of migrants in relation to the response implemented by the police, seen in contrast with the irresponsible behavior of Moroccan authorities on the other hand. After the 24th of June 2022, we find a surprising absence of explicit reference to the Melilla massacre when looking at documents presenting a dominant lexical managerial border. The analysis emphasizes a shift, entailing an increase in the use of terms related to the security frame due to the presence of documents outlining Operation Minerva (launched every year in the summer period on these specific borderlands) and police operations against human and drug trafficking networks. These documents describe the deployment of Frontex alongside the Spanish National Police to manage migratory flows from Morocco, focusing on border security and the prevention of illegal crossings.

Although the Melilla massacre is not mentioned, the movement across the border is highlighted as an ever-present security issue: the primary concern is to protect national borders from illegal activities, including unauthorized entry and other cross-border crimes. This framing presents people on the move as potential lawbreakers or security threats through the use of adjectives like illegal (activity of crossing the border) and criminal (people on the move referred to as smugglers). The disruptive event is, as such, *invisibilized* and movement on the border framed through terms creating a narrative of securitization.

By examining the documents with a dominant lexical managerial border throughout the rest of the year until February 2023 (month of reconciliation between Spain and Morocco), we witness a predominant administrative frame, still followed by the security frame. For example,

the stories of individuals rescued by the national police that we saw introduced just after the Morocco-Spain incident—from May 2021 to July 2021—gave way to increasingly more reports of criminal arrests. In this sense, the few terms that referred to people on the move through migrant rights lenses in the second half of 2021 disappear: the human migrant is absent in these narratives, while the abstract process of migration and its management regains priority. It is also important to reflect on the absence of the Melilla massacre as a crisis at the border when analyzing these actors' narratives. Powerful policy actors chose not to mention the event and claim it as a disruption on the border: these actors' negligence of the event did not mean that the event was not framed as a crisis by other actors on the border context.

The humanitarian border

The migrant rights frame reports terms that are related more to the people on the move rather than to the process of movement—migration. In this sense, this frame constructs a narrative of migration as inherently human: the person on the move, with their rights, is emphasized in this lexical border. The migrant rights frame presents us with a different part of the border, the humanitarian, concerned with principles, namely the rights of people on the move more than with the management of the movement. As expected, this frame and lexical border are dominant in the documents written by IAOs which depict migrants primarily as individuals with inherent rights, emphasizing their human aspects and vulnerabilities - in several instances, for example, people on the move's right to education is stressed, with a particular attention to the rights of minors on the move. The human in the process of migration is *visibilized* while the process itself takes less attention in these documents. However, both in the case of the Morocco-Spain incident and the Melilla massacre, we see an increased focus on the nature of movement—rather than just on the condition of people on the move. As opposed to the security frame, the migrant rights frame reports the term irregular (rather than illegal) when describing the movement of people without a regular status crossing to Ceuta and Melilla—and thus to Spain. This choice reflects an attempt to neutralize the criminal connotations of illegal, focusing instead on the irregular status of the process. In fact, crossing a border is not connotated negatively in this specific lexical border. When mentioning irregular movement, we often find reference to terms advocating for the humane treatment of migrants crossing the border—even when done irregularly—and emphasizing the need for legal pathways and the protection of human rights over punitive measures.

It is thus more prevalent to encounter the term irregular within the humanitarian border and the term illegal within the managerial border. IAOs' documents reporting the term illegal use it rather to describe police and authorities' actions against migrants denouncing the violence

on the border. As a result, when terms transition from one border to another, we find that they undergo a change in meaning, indicating a difference in the qualitative understanding of the same exact terms and a tension in ascribing specific qualitative meaning to terms.

After the 24th of June 2022, in contrast with the trend in the managerial border, we find reference to the event referred to as a massacre of human beings. The episode and the border itself are defined as violent, bloody and deadly. In this period, we increasingly see a reflection of ongoing discussions of human rights violations on the border. Particularly salient are incidents of violence and the need for justice for victims and an explicit critique of European migration governance whose implications lie at the origin of such deadly and violent disruptions at the border. The claims on the rights of migrants as human beings, advocating for their protection, human treatment, and access to legal and social services, remain stable throughout the period. In the paper's next section, we present the analysis of the interviews conducted with the representatives of the IAOs: our aim was here to triangulate our data on the approach of IAOs. These interviews allowed us to delve deeper into the humanitarian border approach revealing to us an approach that we define as of principled pragmatism.

Visibilization of the human migrant: an alternative border?

Representatives of independent and activist organizations in Ceuta and Melilla claim migration on the border context to be “something constant though *invisibilized*” (Interview Solidary Wheels). The term *invisibilized* reflects a process of actively making movement and people on the move invisible on the border. Migration can also be securitized and criminalized, when framed as an issue of security, legality and emergency (Interview No Name Kitchen, Solidary Wheels). Interesting insights come from the representatives' reflections on the process of problematization, securitization and criminalization of movement. One of the representatives, mentioning the number of people involved in the governance of migration in Ceuta and Melilla, refers to the “business of immigration” on these borders, “from all security and police forces involved to the people working in the administration, a lot of money are given from the peninsula to these borders [for the management of immigration]” (Interview Solidary Wheels). The interviewee describes how, in moments of calmness at the frontiers, there is a “strange feeling”. Elaborating on the concept of “business of migration”, the interviewee explains how “[...] in Melilla there are many workers related to, we would say, the migration business. Because sometimes it really looks like that. Because people do not want migration, but jobs here depend on migration flows”.

Additionally, through migration that is *invisibilized* comes an ignorance of practices around it. This *invisibilization* occurs due to the lack of transparency and accountability by the

actors responsible for these practices in the name of the need for effective pragmatism in urgency. In the testimonies of the representatives, this lack of transparency and accountability in practices leads to a state of constant and normalized chaos and confusion, where governance and practices are unclear, as well as who should implement governance.

One representative (Interview Asociacion Elin) reflects on the missed opportunity for these border contexts when looking at how migration is framed and then perceived by those defined as “the locals” in Ceuta. Migration is often *invisibilized*, even for people from Ceuta who “know that people move and arrive here” but are never invited to question the situation on a deeper level. Consequently, there is a general ignorance, detachment and indifference around the border context when discussing at the European and national levels but even when discussing with people from the border itself:

When I say I am from Ceuta, people always ask me about what they hear from the news. How is it when people try to get in by jumping the wall, how life really is there, where are these people living, what is going on in the city? This is all very much related to the consequences [of migration]. What I notice through the work in the association is that the focus is placed more on the causes: why are these people on the move and what brought them to travel from their country? What is the role of Spain and the European Union in all this? [...] This immigration is a phenomenon based on inequality. Furthermore, I would say that immigration in the context of Ceuta is not valued. It is seen as a source of problems rather than a source of richness.

In addition to a reflection on migration based on inequality, migration is also framed here as opportunity and richness; richness in a context in which each part of the border society can contribute to that society in a condition of equality. The definition of migration as richness for the territory is translated in practice in the words of one of the representatives of the independent and activist organization, “[...] the association wants to raise awareness and work with the local population of Ceuta. We always talk about migration as a source of richness, not material, but a richness that we can see and share in a condition of equality, when people live and share in a condition of equality.” (Interview Asociacion Elin). The representative’s words also underline the need to think of people on the move and their trajectories rather than only of the potential consequences of movement. In this sense, the words of the interviewed representative confirm the findings presented when looking at the documents of independent organizations that have a clear focus on human beings on the move, their rights, and their legacies.

When investigating the meaning and significance of the term “migrant” in these contexts through the words of the representatives interviewed, we are confronted with the mention of

many characteristics that might refer to the mobility intentions of the people mentioned but also to other characteristics unique/particular to the human being beyond the framing of migrant. Migrants are not firstly framed through their mobility intentions and nationality, even if these elements are naturally taken into consideration; they are framed mainly as people on the move. For example, confirming the data found in the documents, representatives of the independent organizations refer to men, women and minors. One representative mentions, “We mostly work with minors, we give information to the youngsters that are afraid of what might happen to them. They get scared due to misinformation when they hear that something has happened to someone [...]” (Interview Solidary Wheels).

When reflecting on different age groups in the broader group of “migrants”, one interviewee discusses the authorities’ urgency—a kind of “fetishism”—in categorizing human beings first and foremost as “migrants”. One representative reports: “[...] they are not minors to their eyes [the eyes of the authorities]. They are criminalized before everything else. Minors are here treated like adults.” (Interview Solidary Wheels). Being a migrant renders the human category invisible to the authorities, and it is here that IAOs enter into play, offering a response that would take into consideration the human beyond the migrant and act in accordance with the category of human. This process of *visibilization* of the human migrant is implemented in their framing not only as a process in line with principles (i.e., respecting human rights and the rule of law), but also as needed in practice in a context presenting great ambiguity when referring to migrants and their nationalities. In these contexts, in fact, many are the residents who are *migrantized* by the system and many are the people on the move who find themselves to be [irregular] residents, immobile and even stuck because of the system. Prioritizing the human is practically useful in these contexts as it clarifies the person’s situation before labelling it according to a system of migration governance that was not designed for such contexts.

However, *visibilizing* the category of human does not mean that these actors disregard people’s mobility intentions and origins—the category of migrant—which, in the current system, is the most important aspect at the managerial border level. On the contrary, disregarding completely the category of migrant would not be in the interest of the border and people living and operating on the borders.

Through the representatives’ words, we grasp an intention to act according to principles also in the interest of the border area and the people living in the border area daily—including these representatives themselves. In this sense, they challenge the managerial border and propose a humanitarian one not only to prioritize ethical concerns over pragmatism but also to specify how the current managerial approach can go against the borderlands’ interest and, as a

result, cannot be considered pragmatic in the long run. The representatives of IAOs, by reasoning along an approach of principled pragmatism, express missed opportunities regarding the management of movement and the unleashing of these territories' full potential. They consider the current approach detrimental to the very borderlands, which, in their view, are becoming militarized, securitized limbos, unpleasant to reside in and where some strive through a "business of migration" that is neither sustainable in the long run nor does it represent the interest of these territories and their residents. We contend that the narratives within a principled-pragmatic approach brought forward by these specific CSOs often represent alternatives to framing of migration and migrants that resulted in the challenges of today's migration and border governance.

Discussion and conclusion

The borderlands of Ceuta and Melilla present—at least—two lexical borders: one that is managerial and that enhances the bureaucratization of migration, emphasizing the process of migration and the *invisibilization* of its human dimension, and another that is humanitarian, which challenges the bureaucratic approach and underlines the humanity in migration. The latter is prioritized by actors that are able to reflect on ethical concerns: independent actors, representing themselves and their teams as activists mobilizing to promote change in this specific policy area. They put forward an alternative lexical border to the managerial approach presented in the frames of national and European policy actors by using terms related to protection and specific human rights and rights of people on the move, but also by employing terms present in the managerial border frames to support different/alternative claims (e.g., the term illegal). Actors that are connected to national and EU institutions are obliged to follow the bureaucracy of the border as opposed to independent and activist organizations. They introduce one perspective on the border using terms that are related to the management of migration, mostly framed as illegal movement.

We show, thus, how the two lexical borders ascribe different meanings to terms used to describe social phenomena and, as a result, create different qualitative borders presenting alternative claims regarding the phenomena on the border. These two alternative ways to present terms and claims around migration and migrants on the border (i.e., the two borders) are in tension. Our analysis sheds light on the evidence that disruptive events have an impact on the frames reported in the documents. A closer look at the frames and their relation with specific times of crisis shows how the bureaucratic-ethical tension between the two lexical borders is heightened in periods close to a disruptive moment as the meaning ascribed to the event and perceptions of its implications to migration and migrants increasingly diverge between the

managerial and humanitarian levels. The documents published by each actor and the distance between the two borders increase through and just after disruptive moments: it is at these moments that actors on the border compete to narrate the story that is told about the crisis.

We see how, for example, national and EU actors define the moments of crisis portrayed as invasion, flood, problem, focusing on the role of the states involved in the management of migration on the border—the state actors of Spain and Morocco are depicted to have the main role in the management of these episodes—alongside the EU, through Frontex, cooperating with the national state of Spain. On the other hand, IAOs—associated with the humanitarian border—tend to define these disruptions as episodes of violence caused by the system in place (EU and national state governance). Representatives interviewed shed light on these crises on the border as system-endemic of a region that has been constructed on conflict and inequalities. The latter *visibilizes* the people of the border and the legacy of the border—prioritizing ethical concerns on how human beings are and were treated in these specific territories and the implications of history and legacy of violence in the territory.

While studies already outlined the tension between more bureaucratic and ethically-concerned approaches when looking at policy-making, we underline the need to investigate actors' framing and responses in moments of crisis when this tension, our evidence shows, is more likely to shine through. The moment of crisis enhances the distance between a more bureaucratic and a more humanitarian approach to migration on the border. The predominance of the lexical managerial border by supra and national actors has clear policy implications: a governance mostly concerned with the management of migration as a process rather than attentive to the needs and rights of the humans who are part of this process. What representatives of IAOs on these borderlands show us is that it is possible to act pragmatically on these asymmetric, multidimensional and conflictual borderlands while still prioritizing ethical questions and human rights. Through the words of representatives, we understand how not only is it possible but also desirable on these particular borders (and beyond) to think of migration as a process enacted by people on the move. Framing the migrant as human first has allowed these organizations to understand the nature of mobility of the people at the receiving end of migration governance on the border and, as a result, to manage their situation in a more effective and pragmatic way. Moreover, framing migration as an intrinsic part of these borderlands—and potentially as an opportunity—has made it possible for these organizations to alleviate a tense atmosphere, engaging and investing in community building on the border.

Defined as activists, they promote or resist change with the aim of altering existing arrangements of power and distribution (Cichowski, 2010). Given the focus of this piece, we

contribute to the debate on the role of civil society organizations and their activism in questioning the efficacy and adequacy of specific policies and bringing forward alternative perspectives influenced by ethical concerns regarding existing governance.

Our analysis has shed light on lexical borders that are shaped within the border context, reflecting on their differences, particularly in moments of disruption. The challenge, however, presents itself in finding ways to close the gap between these borders within the border. In a more in-depth analysis of IAOs, through the interviews conducted with their representatives, we are confronted with an approach that is highly focused on the humanity involved in the migration process and the principles that should guide it. However, we also identify the value to the representatives of a pragmatic approach on the border—that would often be posed in opposition to a principled approach. This pragmatic approach presents itself in the organizations' response informed by the specific border situation where the construction of a more humanitarian border would not only be in line with principles, thus responding to ethical concerns, but also helpful to the borderlands' further development—and, as a result, in the interest of the border itself.

Therefore, we argue that these independent activist organizations bring forward a perspective deeply embedded in principled pragmatism—according to which the commitment to human rights and respect of international law is presented not only as a priori but also because of the consideration of practical advantages of the application of these principles for the needs of this specific border context. These needs are based on the IAOs' thorough knowledge and experience the border. National and European authorities' current approaches have many disadvantages and are perceived by the IAOs as damaging the context and creating a loop of disruptions which, they argue, in the long run, is inefficient and disruptive to the border context.

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Empirical Article VI

Narrating crises of Europe's southernmost *borderscapes*: the case of Melilla and Lampedusa

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Abstract

This paper presents the qualitative content analysis of claims in mainstream media made around crises related to immigration at specific *borderscapes* of the European Union located in two Southern European Member States, namely Italy and Spain. The two selected border crisis cases are the tragic shipwreck of Lampedusa, which occurred on the 3rd of October 2013, and the Melilla massacre, which occurred on the 24th of June 2022. I argue that both events were pivotal in shaping the view (local, national and international) on these borders given their broader mediatic reach, which gave these borderlands unprecedented attention, despite being only two of the numerous tragedies that took place on the central and western Mediterranean migratory routes since the early 2000s. The aim of the analysis is thus to compare claims made in the media around the mentioned events on these specific *borderscapes*, peculiar areas shaped by transnational flows that have existed and developed beyond the constructed idea of the national state and its clear-cut borders. Indeed, I argue that what happens on these *borderscapes* and its consequential media representation profoundly shapes the way we think about these territories, migration flows, and migrants at the national and European levels. The aim is thus to detect potential similarities and differences in how these events are narrated through claims made in the media. These claims and their comparative analysis give us an idea of how these events and these territories are perceived in the two member states and then translated at the European level.

Keywords

Crisis, claim analysis, *borderscapes*, Mediterranean region

Introduction

Evidence has increasingly been showing an issue of emigration and depopulation in the European continent and especially in some of its Southern member states such as Italy and Spain (Becerra & González, 2025; Grignoli et al., 2024; Lama et al., 2025; Tintori & Romei, 2017; Zerka, 2019). However, despite these worrying findings regarding emigration, research

has also found that governance and discourse in these countries have mainly been concerned with a problem of immigration (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018; Brandariz et al., 2025; Bulli & Soare, 2018; Cervi et al., 2020; González Enríquez, 2007; Lama et al., 2025). Furthermore, data has shown that while people might arrive in the member states of Italy and Spain, their objective is often not to stay there (Barbero & Blanco, 2022; Hoque, 2024). Drawing on these puzzling insights from existing research, I contend that these countries' intense preoccupation with immigration lies in how it has been narrated in relation to these countries' most peculiar borders. This piece will thus analyze how migration and migrants are narrated in specific moments of disruption on two different EU member states' borders, namely Italian and Spanish borders on the central and western Mediterranean Sea.

Looking at the central and western Mediterranean Sea map, we see what I define as extracontinental European borders, namely those EU borders that are geographically beyond the continent itself. The way these borders are perceived within and beyond the national state influences the way Mediterranean routes, immigration and European boundaries (geographical, legal, ideological) are perceived in Spain, Italy and the EU. These territories are counter-intuitive as borders of the EU, yet they are the most external borders of the EU. My aim in this piece is thus to answer the research questions: How do mainstream media frame migration in the chosen geographical border contexts in moments of crisis? and What does this framing tell us about migration narratives more broadly?

I analyze the media coverage of two border crises on one Italian central Mediterranean and one Spanish western Mediterranean borderland, namely the 3rd of October 2013 shipwreck of Lampedusa and the 24th of June 2022 Melilla massacre, during the span of one week after the events took place. These two cases happened nine years apart. They were chosen due to the unprecedented national and international media attention they received in their immediate aftermath. Moreover, they were chosen because in both cases these two events represented a shocking precedent: the 3rd of October of Lampedusa became the symbol of the central Mediterranean's tragedies and came to be the Italian National Day of Remembrance and Hospitality (*Giornata della Memoria e dell'Accoglienza*). On the other hand, the Melilla massacre represented a moment in which national and international attention was directed towards the border and the occurrence, mobilized through the hashtag #24J, became the symbol of the brutality of the border and the need to seek justice on the border. The 3rd of October 2013 was highly mediatized as the first profoundly shocking shipwreck for the Italian and EU Mediterranean border (Zerback et al., 2020; Amnesty International, 2023), while the 24th of June 2022 presented an unprecedented willingness to investigate the border from a broader

amount of actors, suspicious of border policies both at the national and regional (EU) levels together with the denunciation of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, and his Spokesperson Stéphane Dujarric (Liboreiro, 2022; StateWatch, 2022). Through a qualitative framing analysis of the selected media pieces, I retrieve specific perspectives (frames) on the events that build up specific narratives that present specific claims. The analysis not only shows how a dominant narrative by the national-state institutions/powerful policy-making actors is presented in the media, but also highlights the potential for these narratives to be challenged by alternative accounts presenting specific counterclaims.

The piece starts by outlining the contexts in which these events occurred: the Mediterranean region and, more specifically, two *borderscapes* in the national states of Italy and Spain. It also underlines key contextual insights of 2013 and 2022, when the two border crises occurred. The two crises on European borders happened in different contexts when looking at migration governance of the EU and the two member-states selected and these contexts are outlined in detail. It then presents a separate analysis of the reportage of the Melilla massacre and the Lampedusa shipwreck. In addition to insights referring to the process of reporting dominant and alternative narratives on such events, the comparative analysis in this piece highlights three key points, namely: a. imperialist historical legacies, as in the case of the Spanish enclave of Melilla, translated into a state securitization and militarization narrative of migration on this border today; b. narratives around international migration, despite management of migration being depicted as a national-state affair by the same national-states, always calls for a supranational response and c. narratives of deservingness of specific categories of migrants are dominant and create powerful hierarchies in the representation of people on the move normatively prescribing people on the move as deserving of migrating and being on a specific state soil or not.

The Mediterranean region

The border cases analyzed are located in the central and western Mediterranean regions. Recent scholarship has been arguing for an approach to the Mediterranean region that observes and analyzes it as a category of analysis (Chambers, 2008; Zapata-Barrero, 2023), calling for a way of doing research defined as “Mediterranean thinking” (Med Thinking). Considering the Mediterranean as a “geographical, regional and geo-political area” (Zapata-Barrero, 2023: 1) would, therefore, give more structure in the comparison of areas within the Mediterranean region build by multiple voices, cultures, traditions. While considering national state institutions as key actors in forging narratives on these territories and the phenomena they go

through, the Med Thinking approach allows me to go beyond methodological nationalism: in fact, it underlines how this region has witnessed transnational movement and how thinking in terms of national states and their policies in this space has distracted research from looking at what this region has had in common beyond sharing national state borders (volatile through history and relatively young) and examines other possibilities for political developments in the region (Isabella & Zanou, 2016). An approach of methodological nationalism has contributed to a biased perspective on movement in this region and the role of third countries beyond the EU and has failed to underline the role of narrative and practice ambiguity in this region – considering that state jurisdiction in the Mediterranean Sea ceases at twenty-four nautical miles from the national state (Marino et al., 2024). Studying narratives surrounding territories such as the borderlands here examined with a Med Thinking approach allows us to explore national state and European border identities long in the making: challenging these constructed identities aims to critically analyze rather than destroy them and give space to the advance of alternative narratives arising in moments of disruption in these territories.

The key concept of *Borderscape*

The Mediterranean Sea is a region of border spaces – a region of encounters and often conflict. These borders in the Med region are *borderscapes* (Brambilla, 2015; Brambilla et al., 2015; Krichker, 2021), i.e. areas "shaped and reshaped by transnational flows, which go beyond the modernist idea of clear-cut national territories" (dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015: 5). The definition of borderlands as *borderscapes* allowed theorists and researchers of border studies to go beyond the physicality of borders, thus distancing themselves from the idea of borders as solely material (Balibar, 2013; dell'Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015). The object of study when looking at borders broadens its potential as non-physical bordering processes start to be analyzed in relation to physical ones. Physical borders' material, institutional, and infrastructural aspects are, however, not denied or put aside (Bassi, 2018; Baumann et al., 2011; Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2024; González-Páramo, 2021).

It is on these borderlands as *borderscapes* – crossroads between empires and crucial areas for power assertion through centuries – that we see the implications of the obsession with the right to border control in their most crude and violent forms. As argued by Baldwin-Edwards (2006), territories such as the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, and islands such as Lampedusa, have been increasingly instrumentalized to foment an emphasis on the security in migration governance with a complete lack of coordination at the EU level, as if movement on these borderlands were simply and uniquely related to the matter of security, thus disregarding matters such as employment, regularization of those undocumented and the rights of long-term

migrants. Mobility on these borderlands has been increasingly and mainly connected to irregular migration despite a legacy of transnational mobility documented through centuries — people's movement is intrinsic to both regions.

Melilla

The first *borderscape* I delve into is Melilla, a Spanish enclave on the northern coast of Africa located between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mediterranean Sea, which fell under the control of the Spanish empire in the 17th century (González Enríquez, 2007). The enclave, spanning an area of 12 km², is home to around 86.000 inhabitants (González- Páramo, 2021). Melilla is separated from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta by 250 kilometres of sea and about 500 kilometres by road, and from mainland Spain by over 200 kilometres, considering its daily connections to Málaga (González Enríquez, 2007).

Melilla remains an isolated and contested territory, as Morocco never recognized Spanish sovereignty over it, and depends on Spain economically and politically; its geographical and social border with Morocco has been well-guarded for centuries. Despite Spanish norms banning the presence of Moroccans in Spanish enclaves since the second half of the 19th century, Melilla today reports the presence of what has been through centuries its dominant group, the *cristianos* (Christians), as well as the *musulmanes* (Muslims), a population of Moroccans origins who settled in the Spanish enclaves throughout the end of the 19th century, mainly working as servicemen. The *cristianos* have always shared religious, linguistic, phenotypical and political bonds with the mainland and mainly settled in Melilla due to military duties, involvement in the colonization process or frontier trade activities (Karell, 2015; Torres Colon, 2008). Still today, military and security forces, as well as other public employees, are the prevalent occupational group for the Spanish population in the enclave (González Enríquez, 2007).

Melilla, as well as Ceuta, has been defined as *limboscape* (Ferrer-Gallardo & Albet-Mas, 2016); in other words, a space where the trajectories of people on the move towards the European continent are spatially and temporally suspended, as there is vast evidence of forced immobility in these spaces (Briones Gómez et al., 2013; Ferrer Gallardo, 2008; Gold, 2000). The enclaves have been through centuries of what is described in Spanish as *fronteras avanzadas* – advanced borders –and are still perceived as a second border used to externalize Spanish and EU borders. In fact, with Spain entering the European Economic Community in 1986, these *fronteras avanzadas* became the EU's enclaves on the African continent (Ribas, 2015; Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023). As Spain became part of the European Community, its borders went through a process of re-bordering, addressing two dimensions: one bilateral

(national) and one communitarian (European), accentuated by Schengen (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023). Melilla's border Europeanization has also increasingly securitized it.

Melilla has been defined as an asymmetric, multidimensional and conflictual border. “Asymmetric” because these enclaves re-enact an economic, cultural and historical- political disparity developed through centuries of Spanish presence on these territories; “multidimensional” because there are a lot of diverse actors at different governance levels (local and autonomous, national and European) involved on these borders; and “conflictual” due to the historical legacy of the territories – conceived as a fortress to protect the Spanish empire beyond the peninsula and to expand it – and the struggle that disparity and inequalities brought by (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023; González-Páramo, 2021). Here, the mentioned *fronteras avanzadas* manifest non-physically through the ongoing cooperation with Morocco, which, despite being reluctant to recognize the enclaves as Spanish, increasingly collaborates with Spain regarding border controls due to concerns related to border crime and “irregular” migration (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023) and receives financial support from Spain and the EU to keep migrants away from their borders (Jones et al., 2022). A non-physical *frontera avanzada* refers thus to the border's extension beyond its physical location, encompassing the cooperation between Spain, the EU, and Morocco in migration and border control. It is a key aspect of the Melilla border situation, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of this *borderscape* in its relationship with the EU and Morocco. In this territory, the tension of an environment constructed to be hostile towards specific people on the move is tangible through physical and non-physical characteristics. The region of Melilla has been, through its history, first and foremost, one of transit and cross-border movements (González Enríquez, 2007). Traders from Morocco would buy goods in both the enclaves and sell them in Morocco, making this trade one of the most important economic activities in the region (Soddu, 2006). This transnational daily mobility has thus been part of Melilla’s daily life as a borderland. In addition, the enclave has shown to be more and more eager to attract tourists and temporary mobile people (Poulaki et al., 2023; Timothy, 1995).

The Spanish enclaves on the African continent have always been territories of encounter, even when conflictual encounters. Melilla and the Moroccan-Spanish border report a tension, connected to the perpetrated hostility and violence created by the then- imperial domination, reflected in today’s national state (and EU) control over its border. Despite the challenges Spain and the EU face in reconciling their externalization project with the EU’s normative mission/goals and proclaimed Western values allegedly focused on a human rights approach, this securitizing and externalizing vision continues. Diplomatic crisis at the border has earned

the enclaves the concept of a “border of distrust” (*frontera de la desconfianza*), mentioned in the Spanish national newspaper El País when reflecting on Spain-Morocco relations. This phrase accurately describes the current perception of instability and, consequently, the international relations developing when managing the border by the powers involved.

Lampedusa

Lampedusa is Italy’s southernmost island, situated 205km off the coast of Sicily. Since the early 2000s, it has come to be associated with migrant deaths and irregular landings, leading to competing yet complementary political discourses of humanitarianism and securitization (Dines et al., 2015). Research on the island has focused on analyzing the development of migration and border governance and studying its societal consequences, mainly how the island has changed through migration and its governance. Investigations centred at times more on the analysis of narratives – mainly text analyses – and others more focused on practices – some others considering both (Bassi, 2018; Catania, 2015; Corso & Mookherjee, 2024; Cuttitta, 2014; Di Matteo, 2023; Diaferia, 2022; Dines et al., 2015; Elbek, 2023; Finiguerra, 2023; Franceschelli, 2020; Fusari, 2024; Kushner, 2016; Muneroni, 2015; Quagliariello, 2021).

When looking at migration governance and Lampedusa, studies investigated the island drawing from the overall Italian approach to migration that, especially from the early 2000s onwards, concentrated on Lampedusa on the Italian – and since 1996 and Schengen – European border (Andrijasevic, 2006; Bartholini, 2018; Bassi, 2018; Calarco, 2024a). Humanitarian organizations on Italian southern borders – including Lampedusa – became increasingly and systematically involved in migration governance in the early 2000s. However, it was only after 2015 that Italian governments adopted what we define as the hotspot approach, further restricting policies to contain migration and to confine and marginalize migrants. A migration and border management system in the Italian case started to develop with the implementation of the Schengen agreements through the Treaty of Amsterdam (Barents, 1997; Calarco, 2024a). While a more restrictive and migrants’ exclusionary approach has been characterizing the last decade starting from 2015, it is important to underline that it is precisely since the implementation of the Schengen Agreements (1990s) that the Italian and European Union approach has been one of externalization of border controls – in collaboration with third countries, despite research mainly focusing on more recent examples of externalization. An Italian approach to externalization of border controls in collaboration with Northern African countries since the late 90s coincides with the construction of the first reception centre in Lampedusa in 1996 – the result of an increase in arrivals in 1995. From the early 2000s, the

Strait of Sicily became the most crossed Italian sea border area and Lampedusa the centre of the management of arrivals in this specific border area (Calarco, 2024b; Triandafyllidou, 2014).

Studies investigated Lampedusa, its narrative and construction as the Italian and European border through the decades: a few studies also analyzed the island's narrative of hospitality with a reflection on the role of locals and the consequences of Lampedusa's increasing visibility for their lives (Franceschelli, 2020; Quagliariello, 2021). Research revealed profound contradictions and paternalistic trends when looking at the narratives of migrants versus the portrayal of European "saviours" (Di Matteo, 2023; Palladino & Woolley, 2018). Lampedusa has thus been studied as an isolated and isolating territory. Apart from physical isolation, the island is also referred to as the "Gateway to Europe," which is reflected in the construction of the monument by the same name, which highlights the notion of the island as a boundary that separates what is considered "Europe" from what is not (Finiguerra, 2023). Lampedusa is thus the physically and socially constructed demarcation between what is considered Europe (e.g., modernity, prosperity, life) and what is not (e.g., backwardness, poverty, death). Through this construction, the "Other" does not have a voice and is often *invisibilized* (Finiguerra, 2023; Muneroni, 2015).

Lampedusa, located closer to the African continent than the European one, has a unique history due to its peculiar geographical position. It would be overly simplistic to classify it as merely European and a "Gateway to Europe", as at times strategically claimed by the media, political elites and researchers. Research on the construction of Lampedusa as a European border and the development of the governance of migration through this strategic use of the border concept must reflect on the island and region's historical developments. Lampedusa, like the whole Italian South (*Meridione*) has a history of being denigrated by the rest of the peninsula due to the strong, instilled *anti-meridionalismo* – a discriminatory aversion towards the Southern region and its people — that characterized the creation and development of the Italian state and contributed to the exploitation, isolation and mismanagement of the country's Southern regions (Gramsci, 2019). Despite the island's growing popularity among tourists and its increasing visibility in national and international news, *anti-meridionalismo* did not simply cease to exist and is now intertwined with xenophobic and anti-migration discourses²⁹.

²⁹ In September 2023, a member of the populist radical-right party, Lega (Lega Nord), made a controversial statement during a party rally in Pontida. The statement displayed a profound ignorance of migratory patterns and global geography more generally, as it referred to the African continent as a single entity rather than acknowledging its numerous and diverse realities. This type of rhetoric is denigrating and can be traumatic for many people in Southern Italy, particularly in Lampedusa that, according to this militant, could simply, from one day to another, cease being part of the Italian state (Marino et al., 2024).

Research and current developments demonstrate the malleability of this peculiar border, which is either celebrated or denigrated, Italian - and European - but African at the same time, seen as disruptive and incapable of handling migration flows; a symbol of the failure of Italian and European migration governance or heroic for resisting an uncontrolled invasion and the lack of state and supranational coordination. Despite its increasing visibility – in media, politics, and research – Lampedusa reflects the legacies of decades of negligence from the Italian state and the European project, treated as a(n) – often strategic – periphery. The history of *anti-meridionalismo* shows us how in the recent past – and at times in the present too – people from Lampedusa have been considered second-class citizens by the Italian state, and the island dealing with its struggles were often abandoned by national authorities long before the construction of the border and migration management as a result of the increasing flows in the central Mediterranean.

2013 versus 2022

Migration governance at the EU level after 2015 has often been presented and studied as more securitized and more concerned with the externalization of European borders (Bergmann & Müller, 2023; Engelbert et al., 2019; Niemann & Zaun, 2023). Nevertheless, analysts have pointed out the presence of Italian politicians' externalization efforts and securitization rhetoric since the early 2000s (Calarco, 2024b; Terlizzi, 2021). In 2007, Italy signed an agreement with Libya to cooperate in controlling Libyan coasts to stop human smugglers. In addition, there is evidence of several pushbacks conducted by Italian authorities since 2009. In 2011, then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi called for additional cooperation with Tunisia to control the border. Cooperation with third countries of Northern Africa was presented as a humanitarian type of governance because it prevented people from leaving transit countries and thus dying at sea (Terlizzi, 2021). Looking at the Spanish case as well, we see evidence of securitization of governance on the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla since the early 2000s when, analysts show, the Europeanization of Spanish borders further securitized these territories bordering Morocco (Engelbert et al., 2019). The process of securitization of the Spanish – now EU – Moroccan border is said to have started in the early 90s, with the first Spanish-Moroccan cooperation acts: the early 2000s witnessed increasingly repressive measures from the Moroccan side against anyone trying to cross these borders (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023).

In 2011, Italy, a country of emigration with little experience in immigration governance, started dealing with a growing number of arrivals. As a result of increasing political instability in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean, Italy became an asylum seekers' receiving country (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018), with arrivals starting to be highly mediatized and

referenced by those in power (Terlizzi, 2021). As a result, at the moment of the Lampedusa shipwreck on the 3rd of October 2013 we see Italy be crucially confronted with the consequences of political instability in the Mediterranean and the concept of refugee and asylum seekers and the implications of this for migration governance.

On the other hand, when looking at the year 2022, several analysts report an increase in politicization of migration especially after the highly mediatized and so-claimed migration crisis of 2015 (Brug et al., 2015; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Engelbert et al., 2019; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Mitić, 2018; van der Brug et al., 2015), when migration “was experienced as a major political and humanitarian challenge for the EU and its member states” (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017: 1763). In addition, the year 2022 had seen the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on the narratives of migration and migrants, enhancing further securitization and the idea of migration and the migrant as a threat to citizens’ health/public health (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021; Pomara et al., 2023). Moreover, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Spanish-Moroccan border deals with a peculiar border crisis caused by the migration governance partner on this border, Morocco. In May 2021, Moroccan authorities reduced the heavy militarization of the border, as a result of their frustration at the Spanish Government decision to offer health assistance to Brahim Ghali, leader of Western Sahara (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) and head of the Polisario Front, rebel Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement claiming Western Sahara against Moroccan control of the region (Reuters, 2021). Over 36 hours, an estimated number of 8,000 migrants crossed into the territory from Morocco to Ceuta. In this episode lies the beginning of a diplomatic crisis between Spain and Morocco, which will ease its tension throughout the year 2022, when the Melilla massacre at the hands of Moroccan and Spanish forces takes place.

It is evident that nine years have brought changes in the EU, Italian and Spanish migration governances. While in 2013, we already witnessed securitization at the national level (in case of Italy), in 2022, the EU was much more implicated into the governance of migration. Having outlined the diverse contexts in which these disruptive events took place surely has an impact in the way they are reported by the media. Taking into consideration these contexts is crucial, while the scope of the analysis remains comparative of two disruptive events that shaped the border through their unprecedentedness, or better perceived unprecedentedness, which is reflected in the media reports.

Narratives of disruptive events on *borderscapes*

Having introduced the geographical and temporal scope of the events whose narratives are analyzed, this section introduces the concept of narrative. Narratives report actors’ perspectives

on specific social phenomena: these perspectives build up narratives of a social phenomenon so that the story presented appears plausible and stable (Boswell et al., 2011). Narratives are built up by perspectives and – at times – claims, which are assertions that are based on a perspective (or more) and that are normatively charged in the sense that they report what is believed to be good or bad, right or wrong in that instance (Marino & Ruedin, 2023).

Different actors have different perspectives that build up different narratives, which might present different claims, normatively charged assertions, about a phenomenon. The media has a central role in sharing narratives regarding a phenomenon in our societies. The media – be this mass media or social media – play an important role in connecting the actors constructing a narrative to audiences of these narratives, providing a platform for some perspectives and claims in detriment of others (Reese & Shoemaker, 2017). Narratives presenting perspectives are not necessarily normatively charged as they do not always report or intend to highlight what is believed to be good or bad; I define these normative assertions as claims which can be part of a narrative. For example, reporting that “a total of 105 migrants were rescued last night in Italian waters” is different from reporting that “another boat with more than 100 illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean to reach the European continent through Italy was given assistance last night in Italian waters” – the latter includes a specific qualitative adjective already carrying a normative component. A third example reporting that “Italy’s PM has declared that a multitude of illegal migrants is crossing the Mediterranean sea to get to our country and NGOs operating in the Mediterranean help them in reaching Italian shores: what we could consider an actual invasion has to be stopped, not aided” is different from those mentioned above: here, a narrative charged normatively presents a specific claim, much like the second example (with the use of the word “illegal”), and a specific call for action to do what it is right (stop the “illegal migrants” in this case). Guided by this specific conceptualization of narratives, I focus on the dominant claims, as well as the counterclaims, that are present in the narratives of the documents analyzed.

Melilla: a mainstream narrative concerned with territorial integrity and a security crisis

The analysis of the media reporting the Melilla massacre of the 24th of June 2022 at the Spanish national level revealed surprising insights, especially in the shifting of the representation of the event with relative claims. The range of media reports was selected to investigate mainstream media through the most read media outlets, which were considered slightly more “centered” than others. However, the two leading Spanish newspapers, El País and El Mundo, are reported as a more center-left newspaper – the former, and reporting a more rightist perspective – the latter (Guerrero-Solé, 2022). El País and El Mundo also report the largest number of online

followers, reflecting their influence online (Yu, Lu, & Muñoz-Justicia, 2020). Documents were also collected from their online versions through LexisNexis' database.

The documents published twenty-four hours after the event presented highly securitized lenses. All the selected media channels report the event as a security crisis, highlighting how “violent migrants”³⁰ were seen “attacking” the security forces on the border in what they define as a “violent assault” to the frontier declared “in danger”. Many were the statements reported in the media by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), and other ministers of his Government. The crisis is also presented as a critical moment through which it is crucial to “ensure Spanish territorial integrity.” Several are the calls for the help and support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in ensuring this territorial integrity through article five, enshrining the “principle of collective defence,” which means that “an attack against one Ally is considered as an attack against all Allies” (NATO, 2023). The migrants’ attempt to cross the border in Barrio Chino, Melilla, on the 24th of June is here equated to an attack of warfare. EU representatives fed into this specific narrative as Charles Michel, President of the European Council, is reported on the 26th of June 2022 to have said that the Council “fully support[s] the efforts of Spain and other countries on the front line to protect the borders of the European Union.” In this narrative, there is no mention of the human side of this crossing: it is often concealed who/what exactly the EU borders have to be protected from. When mentioned, migrants are never presented as human beings; while it is understandable that in the first few days after the event media outlets may not yet have known of the full scope and the perpetrators of the massacre, nothing is written about the people crossing in the two days immediately after the events – such as the location they were coming from or how exactly they arrived to the area. In the initial coverage of the event, violence is highlighted and the group portrayed as a de-humanized monolith.

While there is a clear security focus, we also find many terms related to the administrative and management frame when describing the event: the administrative frame reports terms which describe the work of Moroccan and Spanish forces at the border and their “excellent” response to the crisis. Claims report the need for more security forces at the border. Despite referring to the administration management tasks, the documents produced in the first twenty-four hours after the event refer to the forces “defending” rather than “administrating/managing” the border.

³⁰ Own translation of the quoted parts.

After the first twenty-four hours, other claims about the event emerged and were reported by the media outlets. While there was throughout the whole week a recurrent preoccupation with Spanish territorial integrity and the role of NATO in supporting the Spanish national state, which shows that the claim of a security crisis never disappears in the media, other claims creating alternative narratives of the event – and the potential crisis at the border – emerged. On the 25th of June 2022 civil society actors³¹ such as non- governmental organizations, humanitarian organizations, independent activist organizations as well as bishoprics involved on the border started to be quoted in mainstream media: they called for an immediate investigation into the events, countering the version told up to that moment of a security crisis created by violent people on the move who were crossing the border. Some NGOs³² organized protests, which took place in different municipalities of Andalusia and Melilla.

Political movements and parties³³ also expressed criticism regarding the response by police forces, now considered violent on Moroccan and Spanish sides, against unarmed people on the move. The criticism was also directed towards the government and its praise of the police forces on both sides. They also called for an “urgent investigation of the events”. It is crucial to underline the international scope of this call for investigation during the week after the massacre, with the African Union (AU) Commission, the United Nations (UN), the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW) joining these demands. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, as well as some European Parliament members/deputies (MEPs), were also cited in calls for an investigation by the European Commission.

Footage of the event emerging from journalistic investigations led the way for the call for more clarity: as a result, in the course of six days, we see several claims by the above-

³¹ Asociación Elín – a non-profit and humanitarian organization which promotes interculturality and develops a growing diverse community on the border; La Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado (CEAR) – Spanish NGO founded in 1979 with the main objective of defending the rights of refugees, stateless people and migrants in need of international protection; La Delegación Diocesana de Migraciones de Málaga y Melilla – Diocesan Delegation of Migration of Malaga and Melilla; Barrios para el Seguimiento de Menores y Jóvenes – an association of Neighborhoods for the Support of Minors and Youths; La Plataforma Bienvenid@s Refugiad@s de La Rioja – a citizens’ platform to share initiatives and resources to help refugees; El Colectivo Sin Fronteras de Albacete – Non-profit organization whose main purpose is to provide assistance to vulnerable social groups; Social organizations of the Jesuits working on the Spanish-Moroccan border; The Moroccan Human Rights Association (AMDH); Amnesty International.

³² Amongst others, the most active were Asociación Inmigrantes Sin Fronteras, Somos Migrantes and Federación Africana de España.

³³ Amongst others, the most active in demanding the implementation of an investigation were Izquierda Unida, Podemos, ERC, EH Bidu, Compromis y Más País.

mentioned civil society actors shedding light on the humanitarian toll of the event, now defined as massacre perpetrated by the security forces. Civil society actors and some political parties fiercely opposing the Government's response and rhetoric on the event appear in the media as the most vocal in defining the event as a massacre where the human rights of people on the move had been crushed. The images coming from the border are here defined as "dantesque/infernal and dolorous" and received with "absolute dismay." The UN speaks about a straightforward "excessive use of force" by both countries' police forces. NGOs talk about "violent repressive acts," which "reveal the racist and xenophobic structure of these [migration] policies" (Asociación Elín), and denounce the "inhumane way" the migrants were treated (AMDH). Political parties' leaders such as Íñigo Errejón (Más País) described the event as "horrible," choosing the same adjective to describe the Spanish Prime Minister's praise of the Moroccan police forces and criticizing the government's stance regarding the Saharawi population – who was allegedly abandoned to pursue migration agreements with Morocco.

This analysis shows the juxtaposition of claims forming diverse narratives: for the Spanish Government and some representatives of the EU (more in specific Charles Michel, president of an intergovernmental EU institution with EU member-states' interests at heart) this can be mostly claimed as a security crisis; for civil society actors such as NGOs and the religious community this is a humanitarian tragedy, a massacre. International organizations, such as the UN, the AU and some representatives of the EU (Josep Borell), reflect on the need to investigate the event to fully understand what went wrong in the management of migration at the border – the concern appears to be two-fold: one of administration of borders of national states and one of the treatment of people on the move at the border. In addition, this analysis shows the importance of temporality in the formulation of claims that build up specific narratives: the immediate reactions to the events significantly differ from the reported claims in the following days. Additionally, the media are highly selective: they tend to report claims by specific actors over others. Immediately after the event, it is clear that the media focus on reporting the reaction by the governments involved in these borders' control, seldom giving voice to the perspective of regional and local actors. This is a specific choice in reporting specific claims, in this case the "security crisis" claims. The reporting of the immediate reaction to the event focusing primarily on the national state and intergovernmental institutions proves this point. Once the critical message is conveyed, space is dedicated to potential alternative views and contestation.

Lampedusa: a mainstream narrative of a humanitarian crisis, a helpless Italy, and a cruel EU

The analysis of the media reporting the Lampedusa shipwreck of the 3rd of October 2013 revealed specific changes in the way it was portrayed during the one week following the event. Diverse claims emerged, although less abruptly than in the case of Melilla. Also, in relation to the previous case, less divergence/conflict amongst these diverse claims is observed. I reiterate the choice of analyzing pieces from media outlets which can be considered not only the most read but also as having a more moderate approach, such as ANSA Notiziario Generale, Corriere della Sera and La Stampa: while ANSA is the primary Italian press agency and a cooperative of all major Italian publishers (Melchior, 2024), Corriere della Sera and La Stampa, in addition to being the second and third most read newspapers in Italy (Statista Research Department, 2023), they are also two media outlets perceived as the most politically neutral newspapers (Bajo et al., 2020).

The first articles published after the event of the 3rd of October 2013 report a high amount of words related to the migrant rights frame, indicating how the event had been a “tragedy”³⁴ for “people whose lives are lost,” those who are referred to as “escaping wars, persecutions, human rights violations” to start a journey and “find death.” Despite this focus on the “humanitarian tragedy,” terms also refer to the need to put an end to the “trafficking of human beings,” indicating that the reason for these “humanitarian tragedies” at sea are caused by migrant smugglers. While there is a clear call for “politics of reception rather than politics of emergency,” we also see claims of a humanitarian crisis perpetrated by human traffickers. In these first media representations, we also read claims regarding the “humanitarian crisis” response carried out in Lampedusa: these claims would be consistent throughout the whole week of reportages. Moreover, Lampedusa’s response is portrayed as “welcoming” and concerned with the rights of people on the move, with residents of Lampedusa doing everything in their power to help the migrants who survived. The portrayal of the island, which had often been denigrated by the same figures then praising it, and of its welcoming response escalates throughout the week: Lampedusa and its inhabitants are even presented at one point as potential recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. The description of a community devoted to welcoming people in need remains a constant portrayal in these newspaper articles, citing the Mayor of Lampedusa, Italian politicians and even the Pope.

³⁴ Own translation of the quoted parts.

Media pieces throughout the week start to report reflections on the role of the European Union in dealing with migration flows. Such a reflection actually starts on the first day of reporting – mainly dedicated to the description of the tragedy, the locals’ response, and statements by government officials. The primary claim is that action is needed at the EU level and that the Government must “appeal to the European Union to avoid similar humanitarian tragedies.” While statements by the EU are reported as well, such as those of “sadness for the tragedy,” the main statements on the EU are by national and local actors calling the Union to consider immigration as a policy priority and prevent such events by acting in a “joint effort,” thus underlining the need to better coordinate responsibilities amongst member states. Other political actors, such as the then President of Italy, Giorgio Napolitano, expressed the need for the international community and the EU to take action in the face of such “massacres of innocent people.” Government officials highlight their efforts in reporting such a critical situation to an EU that supposedly does not want to listen.

The claims of the need to take action are directed towards the EU, and not without frustration. Nevertheless, criticisms are also directed to Italian migration policies by Italian politicians, such as the minister of integration at the time of the shipwreck, Cécile Kashetu Kyenge, and international organizations such as The Council of Europe. Gino Strada, founder of the Italian NGO Emergency, an independent organization providing medical and surgical care to victims of war, landmines and poverty (Emergency, 2025), defined Italian migration governance as “criminal,” transforming desperate people into *clandestini*, illegal immigrants, and, as a result, into criminals. In particular, the Bossi-Fini³⁵ law is criticized as discriminatory by many in the opposition and NGO representatives.

Another focus on the media reports in the course of the selected week is on the call for investigations around the role of the *scafisti*, the human smugglers. Statements point to the need of hunting and taking down the smuggler, an ambiguous and vague figure almost solely responsible for the death at sea. In fact, if there are some claims considering Italian and European migration governance as partly responsible for this disaster, as argued by NGOs and some members of the opposition, the most often shared claim on the tragedies at sea is that the smugglers are the main culprits. These *scafisti* are never described, nor more precise information regarding their existence or potential organization and affiliation is discussed: they are simply evoked as “criminals,” “responsible for all life lost at sea,” and “predators

³⁵ Passed on the 11th of July, 2002, the decree Law No. 177, also known as the “Bossi-Fini” law, introduced a stricter enforcement of compulsory repatriation, prolonged the reclusion period in the Temporary Stay Centres (CPT) and introduced detention for overstayers (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018).

(profittatori).” Senator Antonio Gentile, from the party The People of Freedom (in Italian Il Popolo della Libertà), a centre-right political party in Italy founded by Silvio Berlusconi in 2008, is reported declaring that *scafisti* are “criminals who should be prosecuted with effective bilateral agreements and the harshest punishments should be applied to them, including life imprisonment and the prison regime provided for crimes of mafia.” The smugglers are also at the centre of another statement by the radical right party, Lega (Lega Nord before 2018), today known for its highly anti-immigration narratives and policies (Dennison & Geddes, 2022), which declared to be:

dismayed and heartbroken in the face of yet another unprecedented massacre in the Mediterranean Sea, on our shores. A sea easily controlled but instead left in the hands of those without humanity [i.e., human smugglers] who profit on the lives of innocents who leave attracted by the hope of a dignified life.

It is surprising to report such a statement by Lega’s representatives who, while using the vague figure of the “smuggler” as scapegoat and most right-wing political parties’ statement in the documents analyzed, describes migrants as “innocents who leave for a more dignified life”: this narrative by Lega’s representatives seems to have significantly shifted in the last 10 years.

Therefore, throughout the week, there is no counterclaim that opposes the claim of the event as a “humanitarian crisis/tragedy.” There are a few claims by specific actors on the responsibility of Italian law, which had allegedly become increasingly “strict and discriminatory.” Yet the mainstream narrative (i.e., the one more often voiced by influential actors, such as government officials and prominent politicians) tends to report the event as a humanitarian tragedy caused by the lack of support by EU institutions and the wickedness of the smugglers. Claims by international organizations and independent NGOs challenge this specific claim by presenting the damages caused by the most recent changes in Italian migration governance, such as the mentioned Bossi-Fini law. Amongst others, Marco Furfaro (Sinistra Ecologia Libertà)’s statement is reported in one piece, claiming that:

After the massacre, the deaths and the mockery of the warnings to the surviving refugees, who are being investigated for the crime of illegal immigration, the government has a duty to immediately abolish the Bossi-Fini law and define a new immigration regulatory framework to avoid these tragedies.

This claim also contrasts the mainstream narrative of Italy as the welcoming country doing everything in its power to save lives at sea. As a result, despite media presenting a more coherent and less conflictual narrative of the event compared to the reportage of the events in Melilla, we still find specific counterclaims challenging the mainstream – apparently cohesive

and widely accepted – narrative. In this specific case, the claims reported as an immediate reaction to the event were not confronted with the same amount of counterclaims on the event, still predominantly presented as a humanitarian tragedy and a humanitarian crisis for “our Mediterranean Sea.” Counterclaims did not challenge the qualitative nature of the crisis; disagreements were circumscribed to the causes of the crisis, responsible actors and potential solutions.

Comparing EU Borderscapes narrating border disruptions

The media narratives of the two selected disruptive episodes at the border differ in the way mainstream narratives associate them with specific qualitative descriptions. A mainstream narrative of the Melilla massacre reported terms more related to a security perspective, concerned with the territorial integrity of Spain and the need for support of NATO, claiming danger and the urgent need for a militarized, securitized response. This narrative does not consider the immigrant as an individual but rather collectivizes “immigrants” as a “dangerous group” attacking the border. In this process of collectivization, there is a de-humanization of people on the move: they are not humans but rather a massive threat lacking a description or any type of character other than “violence” and terms such as “attack” are deployed to describe the group’s actions. This narrative also collectivizes forces employed in border control on both sides, depicting them as the protectors and defenders of the border and calling for more protection to ensure these people do not have to struggle ever again in their commitment to manage this border. The analysis presented challenging perspectives and claims that came to construct a challenging narrative to the mainstream one just broadly outlined. This narrative presented a perspective of a humanitarian crisis due to the extremely violent and militarized response of the police forces on the border against unarmed migrants: the police forces are here claimed to have caused disruption and death. More importantly, there is a key focus on the mistreatment of people on the move and the call for an investigation of the events, claiming that the police forces not only were inefficient but, more crucially, violated human rights. Specific claims from political parties and movements of the opposition³⁶ advanced the need for an investigation focusing more on the administrative incompetence of the Sánchez Government rather than on the human rights violations on the border: the majority of these parties were mostly concerned with exposing a fallacy of the government, while many non-governmental, independent actors’ claims focused on the fallacies of the border as a whole – independently

³⁶ Amongst others, the most active in demanding the implementation of an investigation were Izquierda Unida, Podemos, ERC, EH Bidu, Compromis y Más País.

from the faction in power. As a result, these latter actors are more concerned with a counter perspective on the figure of the migrant as a "human" brutally killed by the border regime.

The depiction of the “immigrant” When looking at the mainstream narrative of the Lampedusa shipwreck of the 3rd of October 2013, the “immigrant” is also collectivized – in this case, under the “victim” category and, thus, given human characteristics despite the collectivization. The people on the move are referred to here as “running away from wars and violence” and are, as such, migrants who are legitimated in their journey. The highlighting of these migrants as – all – forced migrants collectivizes them in the category of “victim” and “migrant that is allowed to move and want to look for a better future in the European continent” because is a forced migrant whose alternative would be death or a life of violence. In a context where the developments of the escalation of the Syrian civil war and the Libyan crisis were highly mediatized (Giaxoglou & Spilioti, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2018), the narrative around people on the move in 2013 was much more focused on the right of those fleeing war to be welcomed and supported – generalizing all those on the move as people escaping war and violence, as “victims” – despite people on the move involved in the tragic shipwreck of the 3rd of October not being of Syrian nationality. On the other hand, in 2022, when the Melilla massacre took place, people on the move were categorized mainly as economic migrants as there is little to no mention of war and the violent, oppressive contexts many of these people were escaping from.

Another key finding when looking at the mainstream reportage of the two crises on the border is the presence of narratives claiming the need for an increasing presence of specific supranational actors in the management of these crises related to people on the move on the border. While Spanish institutional actors call for the need for NATO to support Spain in the protection of its territorial integrity in the case of the massacre of Melilla, Italian institutional actors call for more responsibility and support offered to the country by the European Union, which is seen as lacking solidarity to help a member state in difficulty when managing a humanitarian crisis caused by migration flows in the central Mediterranean. In 2013, reporting the Lampedusa shipwreck, supranational (EU) and international cooperation initiatives were defined as inadequate in the face of the “gigantic, unstoppable phenomenon of migration, a true emergency of our time”³⁷ and the lack of necessary reforms to face and prevent humanitarian tragedies. In 2022, reporting the Melilla massacre, the call for cooperation was launched by the Government mentioning cooperation in the military field (i.e., cooperation with the Moroccan

³⁷ Statement by Andrea Riccardi, Italian historian and founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic association dedicated to social service in the country.

gendarmerie)³⁸ and was reiterated by outlining NATO allies' responsibilities; NATO allies which would, as the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared, "absolutely stand by Spain if it faces threats and challenges." In both cases, despite national responsibilities in the management of migratory flows and migration governance – which at the EU level is an intergovernmental policy area, we see institutional actors in the two countries recurring to claims of a supranational responsibility for the management of these specific crises at the border. One is more concerned with enhanced cooperation at the EU's migration governance level (2013) while the other highly concerned with a matter of security calling the support of an intergovernmental transnational military alliance (2022).

The reportage of the Lampedusa shipwreck is thus less securitized and more concerned with the humanitarian toll even in its more mainstream, institutional narrative, and, as a result, this mainstream narrative appears less challenged by counternarratives of the event. Furthermore, this narrative is less radical in advancing a potential villain to the story, and no Italian institutional actor appears to have any responsibility in the developments of this event, which seemed to have just happened because of the tragedy of conflict far from the European continent and its realities (criminal smugglers being part of these realities). Immigrants are the victims, as well as Italians and, more specifically, the people from Lampedusa, for long denigrated in the history of the country, but who are, on this occasion, presented as the heroes of the story, generous and welcoming despite the challenges and the alleged lack of support by the EU. Counternarratives of this mainstream institutional narrative contest the failures of Italian migration governance, which criminalizes the person on the move and has made it increasingly difficult to access the country through regular, safest ways. However, only a few actors put forward such a counternarrative. On the other hand, the more securitized perspective advanced by the mainstream narrative of the Melilla massacre showed to be countered more rapidly, in the sense that the first counterclaims of the event as a security crisis appeared in the media within the first twenty-four hours and challenged the mainstream claim of the border crisis as a security crisis, calling for an investigation of the events.

Discussion and Conclusion

Having analyzed these two cases separately and in comparison, three are the key arguments that I present in this piece's discussion and concluding section: firstly, while it is undeniable that the transformation of Spanish borders into European Community, and later European Union, borders enhanced the securitization of Spanish enclaves on African territory and that migration

³⁸ Statement by the then Spanish Foreign Minister, José Manuel Albares, who thanked the cooperation of the Moroccan gendarmerie to enforce the sovereignty at the Melilla border.

narratives in the EU have witnessed an increase in securitization since 2015, the specific case of the Spanish enclave of Melilla allows us to analyze mainstream migration narratives by national institutions and – at times – supranational institutions as legacies of an imperialist narrative highly concerned with the security of the strongholds of Spanish and European power on territories that are beyond geographical Europe. This mainstream narrative does not see people on the move – from the African continent – as such but rather as a constant threat, as attackers of territorial integrity. This perspective on people on the move seems to have been well understood by Moroccan authorities that collaborate on border control with Spain and Europe, using people on the move as pawns to blackmail and putting pressure on Spain and the EU on issues they are concerned with (no matter how much these issues might or not align with Spanish and EU interests and values)³⁹. While such securitization is observable in several EU border contexts, Italian central Mediterranean borders included, the geographical presence of the Spanish national state on the African continent enhances this securitized and militarized approach and makes Spanish/European colonial/imperialist legacies more visible and tangible. Accounts challenging this narrative reflect and underline transnational migration as intrinsic to the territory, directly clashing with a claim of state defense and security– underlining the “human” in migration (in this case, the tragic loss of life), *invizibilized* in the mainstream narrative of a security crisis at the border stemming from an imperialist approach to this border.

The analysis showed a more humanitarian mainstream narrative in the case of the shipwreck of Lampedusa, where Italian state authorities reported statements of concern for the loss of life in the Mare Nostrum, “their” beloved Mediterranean Sea. Here, the migrant is described and perceived as a human being who is fundamentally a “victim,” firstly of the conflict and violence they are escaping from and later of human smugglers who take advantage of their tragedies. Advancing such a mainstream narrative of the “migrant” legitimizes the acceptance of one specific kind of person on the move, the one recognized as “refugee.” As a result, it is the “refugee,” the person escaping death and internationally recognized and highly mediatized conflict, that deserves to migrate towards the European continent and be recognized as human. It is key here to underline that the mainstream narrative is referring to people on the move who died at sea because crossing the Mediterranean irregularly was the only way they

³⁹ I am here referring to the so-defined Morocco-Spain border incident outlined in the contextual section at page 8. During this episode an estimated number of 8,000 migrants crossed into the territory from Morocco to Ceuta over 36 hours. The crossing was possible due to a reduction of the usual heavy militarization of the coasts by Moroccan authorities (Kassam, 2021). This reduction in the heavy militarization was supposedly the result of Rabat’s frustration at the Spanish Government decision to host and offer health assistance to Brahim Ghali, leader of Western Sahara (the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic). Ghali is the head of the Polisario Front, rebel Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement claiming Western Sahara against Moroccan control of the region (Reuters, 2021).

could reach Europe. Counternarratives challenging Italian and European migration governance reflect specifically on this aspect: the impossibility for people on the move, even the ones considered “deserving” by a mainstream narrative, to reach the European continent to have refuge without dying or going through highly traumatic experiences due to the lack of governance that would allow them to reach the continent regularly and safely.

On the other hand, in the mainstream narrative reporting the Melilla massacre, people on the move escaping potential conflict and persecution are *invisibilized*. The *invisibilization* of specific conflict realities where many of the migrants crossing this border come from helped in their categorization as undeserving migrants. At the same time, the high mediatization of political instability and civil war in 2013 enabled the mainstream perspective of the migrant as “victim” of violence and conflict, even if many of the migrants involved in the Lampedusa shipwreck (and migrating through the central Mediterranean route in 2013 in general) were Eritrean and not Syrians or Libyans escaping civil war. These details let us understand the extent to which the migrant is unknown and unconsidered in these mainstream accounts, which in both cases ignore much of the nature of this human mobility and do not report information about it.

Lastly, a key finding of this comparative analysis is that – despite the firm belief of national governments of migration governance as strictly state affairs – their narratives invoke cooperation with supranational organizations such as the NATO and the EU. In addition, they underline the need for cooperation with third states sharing or close to the borders selected in this analysis. Supranational responsibility is thus invoked in both cases: in the case of Spain, we see the call for more support by NATO, in line with the above- outlined highly militarized approach to migration on this border; while in the case of Italy, we see the call for more solidarity at the European level in supporting Italy and border countries dealing with such humanitarian crises. In both cases, we see migration governance translated into a supranational affair, a narrative that contrasts with the idea of a national state responsible for the management of its territory and borders. Both mainstream narratives calling for more responsibility taken by NATO and the EU are challenged by civil society actors and, in some cases, the political opposition. In the first case, we see the challenge of the security crisis as such and thus the involvement of NATO as an actor altogether. In the second case, we see the challenge of the lack of EU solidarity as a crisis and the underlying several fallacies of Italian migration governance and a general antagonistic approach to migration and people on the move.

This piece has aimed to underline similarities and differences in the cases of two European *borderscapes* in the Mediterranean and how disruptive events happening on their territories have been narrated by media at the national level (Spain and Italy). The narratives of

the selected events at these *borderscapes* have shaped the view of migration and migrants at the national level – mainstream leading media being the key actor in reporting mainstream and counter narratives to these countries’ public opinion. In addition, the piece reflected on how specific geographies and historical developments matter in the creation of mainstream narratives of migration and their counternarratives; however, the similarities found in the developments of mainstream narratives show us an approach to migration that has been consolidated in the last decades in Europe. Indeed, the neglect of the human aspect of migration in favor of border control has created long- lasting damaging consequences for the lives of people on the move and for the border contexts and bordering states as well. Indeed, research has shown how this mainstream narratives’ emphasized urgency in the need to protect and control the borders and avoid death at sea has denigrated other key aspects of migration governance – for example, the ones concerned with dealing with the “human” in human migration or the ones concerned with other types of mobility, such as outward migration whose denigration has started to show tangible consequences.

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Empirical Article VII

The Border Remembers: Civil Society's Commemorative Acts in the Mediterranean Borderlands of Melilla and Lampedusa.

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Single-authored article

Abstract

This contribution presents a comparative analysis of commemorative acts occurring in two borderlands situated in the central and western Mediterranean Sea. The two selected acts are the one commemorating the shipwreck of Lampedusa of October 3rd, 2013, and the Melilla massacre of June 24th, 2022. These two disruptions at the border were pivotal in shaping the perspectives (local, national, and international) on migration, its subjects, and its governance, given their broader mediatized reach, which gave these borderlands unprecedented attention. October 3rd has become the symbol of the central Mediterranean's tragedies and is now observed as the Italian National Day in Remembrance of the Victims of Immigration (Giornata nazionale in memoria delle vittime dell'immigrazione), while the Melilla massacre represented a moment in which national and international attention was directed towards the border and the occurrence, mobilized through the hashtag #24J, became the symbol of the brutality of the border and the need to seek justice. The analysis carried out in this piece draws on ethnographic observations of commemorative acts in Lampedusa and Melilla, combined with a claim analysis of speech acts and symbolic practices performed by civil society actors. Commemorative acts are understood here as resources of historical identity and narrative of memory related to traumatic events. In these borderlands, civil society has played a crucial role in continuing to narrate over time. Their commemorative acts have significance beyond the instance of commemorative ceremonies: they are employed to build and develop local memory and identity with broad social ramifications.

Key words

Borderlands, commemoration, border crises

Introduction

What happens at the borders of the European Union (EU) is often portrayed as a crisis related to the movement of people, which demands specific institutional responses (Bello, 2022; Campani, 2018). In addition, borderlands have increasingly been shaped through narratives and policies as living – and surviving – through disruptions linked to migration (Cuttitta et al., 2023; Gabrielli, 2025). Existing literature has investigated EU borders in depth and developed the

useful concept of *borderscape*, intended as an area “shaped and reshaped by transnational flows, which go beyond the modernist idea of clear-cut national territories” (dell’Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015: 5).

Research also reports how institutional narratives on crises involving *borderscapes* perpetuate an image of the border at the national and regional levels. The border is portrayed as a line (Lamour & and Varga, 2020), which can be opened and closed, where local and transnational communities are often *invisibilized* as unknown prostheses of the national state. The interest in the border is revived only through the reportage of sensationalist disruptions which mostly instrumentalize it to emphasize security in migration (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006). Literature itself studies the border in relation with the disruptions happening on these territories – linked to migration and its governance at the national and regional (EU) levels (Aris Escarcena, 2022; Ferrer-Gallardo & Espiñeira, 2015). Given that such disruptions shape the border’s existence and meaning, this paper investigates how these are remembered through time at the local level. The aim is to analyze the role of civil society in developing commemorative acts regarding two border disruptions and the narratives transpiring from their remembrance. The two selected disruptions are the shipwreck of Lampedusa, which occurred on the 3rd of October 2013, and the Melilla massacre, which occurred on the 24th of June 2022⁴⁰. The study focuses more in-depth on the role of civil society in creating and carrying through narratives through commemorative acts.

Indeed, civil society⁴¹ can become an actor – or group of actors – reporting and reiterating specific narratives regarding events, to which they often ascribe qualitative meanings. Commemorative acts, and civil society at the heart of their organization, present narratives with specific claims. The paper thus further investigates the narratives that emerge from commemorative acts and their creation processes in these specific contexts. I argue that while

⁴⁰ It is important to underline that these were not isolated occurrences on such borders. In Melilla alone, people on the move were killed and injured between late September and early October 2005, occurrence which constituted a precedent showing patterns of joint Spanish-Moroccan border enforcement dating back to the early 2000s (Tremlett, 2005). In Lampedusa, the 3rd of October shipwreck in 2013 was preceded by other shipwrecks at sea, including the one on the 6th of April 2011 in which hundreds of people died at sea (over 250 people were reported missing) (La Repubblica, 2011).

⁴¹ In this article, “civil society” refers to the non-state actors who engage in commemorative practices in each *borderscape*, including local associations, activists, volunteers, residents, and transnational networks. In Melilla, this primarily concerns Mec de la Rue, a long-standing grassroots association working with migrant youth. In Lampedusa, commemorative practices are shaped by a hybrid collaboration between civil society and institutional actors: the Committee of the 3rd of October is a non-profit organization, yet its activities are supported by EU, national, and municipal institutions, and involve politicians, schools, and NGOs. This hybridity is analytically significant, as it reveals how remembrance at the border is co-produced by both non-state and institutional actors. In addition, as already mentioned, the Committee of the 3rd of October receives funding from the religious institution of the Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute, a transnational religious organization, further underlining the hybrid configuration of civil society’s actors involved in the organization of such commemorative acts.

narratives by mainstream media have tended to be confined to descriptions that quickly dissolve to present newly claimed crises or false perceptions of a return to normalcy, commemorative acts bring forward narratives of the same events challenging the mainstream tradition in presenting these border crises. How? Specifically, through remembrance linking the past to the present. The paper elaborates on the geographical and political contexts, examining in depth the specific borders and the contexts in which the selected disruptions occurred. It delves deep into the remembrance of specific events at the border to advance the argument that commemorative acts constitute an alternative to the mainstream narratives⁴² of these crises at the border related to migration.

Media narratives have, in particular, often been associated with a more sensationalist, rapid way of narrating events and at times very superficially without reflecting on broader implications and often disregarding the topic after a few days – depending on the gravity of the event (Arbaoui et al., 2020). Sensationalism prevents audiences from being knowledgeable participants in society (Ransohoff & Ransohoff, 2001). Commemorative acts go into depth and are set to remember rather than “stir ‘unwholesome emotional responses’”, shock and/or stimulate morbid curiosities (Brown et al., 2018: 1449). By arguing that commemorative acts present alternative narratives of these events, the paper delves deeper into how they do so and presents a comparative analysis of the two commemorative acts, aiming, more concretely, to shift the analytical attention from sensationalist, crisis driven narratives to more locally grounded commemorative acts which might deliver alternative understandings of migration and the border.

Narratives of Migration

Migration narratives have been extensively studied, from analyses of media representations to studies of governmental and supranational institutions’ depictions of migration at the European level (Ambrosetti & Paparusso, 2018; D’Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Gemi et al., 2013). Scholars have investigated the presence of categorizations of migrants in the media, where they are often referred to as enemies, victims or heroes and shown how governments and institutions in EU member states conduct information campaigns that employ both enemy and hero categorizations through a strategic emotional and dramatic media narrative that stresses the dangers of migrating to Europe and depicts the worthiness of those

⁴² By “mainstream narratives,” I refer here to the dominant narrative frames through which migration and border events are reported in institutional, political, and media channels. These include securitization narratives humanitarian narratives and “crisification” narratives strategically used to normalize exceptions in how we talk about and manage migration and the border and narrating these contexts only in moments of disruption rather than normalcy.

staying in their country of origin (Benson, 2013; Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Horsti, 2016; Mitić, 2018).

Up to now, the presence of a prominent narrative of securitization, linked to negative, alarmist frames of migration and to the categorization of migrants as enemies, has been extensively investigated in the existing literature, focusing on national and supranational cases. Narratives of migration in European media – but not exclusively – appear to have become increasingly stringent and securitized. Media studies have found an increasing normalization of anti-immigrant framing in newspapers, showing the predominant presence of a frame of securitization (Boswell et al., 2021; Chouliaraki, 2012; D’Amato & Lucarelli, 2019). Even humanitarian narratives, which aim to counter securitization, often reproduce depoliticizing victimhood frames that strip migrants of agency (Valente et al., 2023).

This scholarship has also interrogated the migration–crisis nexus, showing how European media and institutions have been particularly effective in politicizing and problematizing mobility through disinformation, producing narratives disconnected from migrants’ lived experiences (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021; Dines et al., 2018; Laine, 2020; McAdam, 2014; Squire et al., 2021). The crisis frame has become a protracted experiential condition, an “epistemological impasse” (Dines et al., 2018: 441), that shapes both public perception and policy responses. Recent work conceptualizes this process as one of “crisification” (Geddes, 2019; Moreno-Lax, 2024), where crisis is used to produce “specific dis-positions that justify [and normalize] exceptional measures” (Moreno-Lax, 2024, p. 185). “Crisification” in narratives of migration involves claiming a normative gap between what is and what should be, thereby prescribing urgent action (Marino & Ruedin, 2023). Narratives of disruption are built through claims that define heroes, villains, victims, and moral imperatives (Jones & McBeth, 2010).

Taken together, this extensive literature shows that institutional, political, and mainstream media narratives of migration towards Europe have reported patterns of securitization and “crisification” of migration flows. These narratives also played a role in creating an image of the *borderscape*, as a site of danger, exception, and emergency.

Commemorative Acts as Narrative

Literature on commemoration has focused mainly on cases within the national state and on the construction of national identity (Blight, 1989; Dwyer, 2004; Mininni et al., 2013; Sumartojo, 2016; Winter, 2006). Memory, defined as conserving the past adjusting it to present needs (Jedlowski, 2001) has predominantly been considered as historical memory of the national state

defined as the result “in a struggle between rival versions of the past, a question of will, of power, of persuasion” (Blight, 1989: 1159).

Since the early 2000s, however, in the broad field of memory studies, there has been critique of a focus on national-state frameworks. A strand of literature reflected on memory as cosmopolitan, referring to a mode of remembering in which certain historical events are lifted out of national narratives and transformed into universal reference points that circulate globally through media, institutions, and human rights discourses (Levy & Sznajder, 2002). Through transnational circulation of memory, which no longer ties memory to national identity but makes it part of a shared global moral community, global concerns can become part of local experiences and identities (Assmann, 2014). These reflections allow us to shed light on the development, especially at the civil society level, of shared human rights regime and transnational solidarity.

Delving deeper into memory as something developed beyond a national community brings us closer to another understanding: memory as multidirectional. This concept, developed by Rothberg (2014), underlines how memory is an interactive, noncompetitive process in which different histories of violence and injustice inform and shape one another across time and space. Several actors propose a specific remembrance of an event, and these versions, according to Rothberg (2014), interact and shape each other, rather than being in opposition.

Literature has also investigated vernacular and grassroots memory to underline the existence and significance of memory beyond the national state underlining how official forms of commemoration, referring to state authorized forms of remembrance, are most successful when they are in relationship with vernacular forms of commemoration, referring to community driven practices that are typically local, informal, spontaneous, ephemeral, or rooted in everyday traditions, customs, and popular culture (Marschall, 2013). By studying vernacular forms of remembrance, studies have underlined the fact that memory is felt through the body, experienced through movement, sound, touch, and performance (multisensory) and produced through relationship with place (spatial), arguing that memory studies should go beyond a long-standing fixation with national frameworks (Till, 2008).

Literature in the tradition of geographies of memory, in particular, has delved deeper into the spatial aspect of memory, arguing that memory and place shape each other and that memory is not just symbolic or narrative, rather it is materially embedded in landscapes, which actively shape how communities negotiate perspectives around the past (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007; Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004). Studies have also analyzed commemorative acts more concretely, highlighting commemoration linked to identity construction of groups within civil

society: they have investigated the role of sport communities (Foster & Woodthorpe, 2012) or indigenous communities, (Jimeno, 2011).

More recently, a study conducted by Horsti & Neumann (2019) compared two processes of commemoration within the border of what the authors call the “global North”, memorializing the deaths of migrants at sea. In addition to a comparison which takes into consideration two entirely different objects of study not only in geographical, but also historical and cultural terms (the capital city of Canberra and the Sicilian island of Lampedusa), this piece of research too reflects on commemoration through memorials linked to a national entity: much more attention is dedicated to the narratives of the national state (at the levels of national government and municipality) rather than those of the civil society involved in these territories (narratives which might align or not with the national and municipal ones). Di Matteo (2023) study also focused on EU *borderscapes* and reported insights on how memorialization practices emerging at sites of migrant death, often through volunteer tourism and humanitarian encounters, can produce ambivalent effects by simultaneously expressing solidarity but also reproducing exclusionary logics embedded in border regimes.

I advance here that existing scholarship has mainly paid limited attention to how interactions between different ways to remember an event materialize through concrete acts. My analysis addresses this gap by examining commemorative acts as the moments in which marginalized memories enter the public domain and interact with dominant narratives. I argue that diverse perspectives on an event’s remembrance need to be given visibility to be able to interact: if they lack visibility in the public sphere, sharing and interacting with more dominant perspectives becomes more complicated. Studying commemorative acts is crucial to understanding this interaction: commemorative acts are moments where one or more memories of an event are given visibility in the public sphere. By focusing on commemorations in Melilla and Lampedusa, I also extend this literature by showing how civil society actors mobilize practices to contest (or not) institutional remembrance of migrant deaths. Moreover, it is important to underline that border sites complicate existing understandings of commemorative landscapes: rather than stable *lieux de mémoire*, they are dynamic, securitized, and politically charged spaces where memory is continually negotiated.

This piece advances memory and, more specifically, commemoration studies by shifting analytical attention from national state frameworks and humanitarian memorialization to commemorative acts created by actors in border zones. While existing research has conceptualized memory as cosmopolitan, multidirectional, vernacular, and spatial, it has rarely examined how specific commemorative acts can operate as vernacular, site anchored

interventions that give visibility to diverse memories of an event which might contest and/or align with institutional and more dominant types of remembrance.

Case Study Selection

Borderscapes of the Mediterranean Sea

The border plays a crucial role in shaping narratives of migration. Speech acts and visual narratives created on the border by diverse actors create a precise image of what migration is, beyond the border's geography. This piece focuses on borderlands located in the western and central Mediterranean Sea, borderlands related to Italy (Lampedusa) and Spain (Melilla). These are areas defined as *borderscapes*, “shaped and reshaped by transnational flows go beyond the modernist idea of clear-cut national territories” (dell’Agnese & Amilhat Szary, 2015: 5), peculiar to the Mediterranean region, marked by encounters of civilizations, built by multiple voices, cultures, and traditions. This definition might recall Fernand Braudel’s conception of the Mediterranean region as a space of layered temporalities, civilizational encounters, and intertwined histories (1949). While recognizing its foundational role, it is important to underline that Braudel’s conception of the Mediterranean simultaneously celebrates interconnectedness while representing Islam and the Maghreb as peripheral to a European historical core and was theorized within the intellectual environment of interwar French Algeria (1949) and reports its French colonial epistemologies (Liauzu, 1999).

The notion of *borderscapes*, as well as more recent accounts on the Mediterranean space, while building on existing foundational work, are clearly distinct as they explicitly foreground power, mobility, and the asymmetries produced by colonial and postcolonial border regimes. The two *borderscapes* whose commemorations of border disruptions I analyze in this piece are the Spanish enclave of Melilla and the Italian island of Lampedusa. Melilla, an isolated area of 12 km² with around 86.000 inhabitants (González-Páramo, 2019) is located 250 kilometers from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and about 500 kilometers by road, and over 200 kilometers from mainland Spain. Similarly isolated is the island of Lampedusa, Italy’s southernmost territory, 205km off the coast of Sicily.

These have always been territories of encounter and are today physically and socially constructed demarcations between what is considered Europe (e.g., modernity, prosperity, life) and what is not (e.g., backwardness, poverty, death) (Finiguerra, 2023). In Melilla, today’s national state (and EU) control over the border is connected to hostility and violence created by past imperial dominations (Gabrielli, 2025). In Lampedusa, we see a context in which the island, despite its recently acquired popularity with national and foreign tourists, suffers consequences of an instilled *anti-meridionalismo* – a northern and center Italian discriminatory

aversion towards the Southern region and its people – intertwined with xenophobic and anti-migration narratives (Gramsci, 2019).

In both *borderscapes*, the commemorative acts analyzed are part of a broader context of commemoration. In Lampedusa, commemorative acts linked to the shipwreck of the 3rd of October 2013 have taken place annually since 2014, involving residents, schools at the national and European levels, non-governmental organizations, transnational networks, and have gradually expanded from a single act to a week of commemorative events. In Melilla, commemorative acts linked to the Melilla massacre of the 24th of June 2022 and, more in general, to deaths at the border, have been more fragmented and less institutionalized, often organized by civil society groups with varying levels of visibility and participation over the years (since 2023). It is important to underline, nevertheless, that in both cases, these commemorative acts are not isolated but rather events within evolving history of remembrance at the border.

Commemoration on Borderscapes

The commemorative acts I analyze are those regarding two border crises on these borderlands, namely the 3rd of October 2013 shipwreck of Lampedusa and the 24th of June 2022 Melilla massacre. These two disruptions were chosen due to the unprecedented national and international media attention received in their immediate aftermath. In addition, the two events represent a precedent: the 3rd of October of Lampedusa became the symbol of the central Mediterranean's tragedies and is now the Italian National Day in Remembrance of the Victims of Immigration. The Melilla massacre, mobilized through the hashtag #24J, became the symbol of the brutality of the border and the need to seek justice. The 3rd of October 2013 was highly mediatized as the first profoundly shocking shipwreck for the Italian and EU Mediterranean border (Amnesty International, 2023; Zerback et al., 2020), while the 24th of June 2022 presented an unprecedented willingness to investigate the border from a broader amount of actors, suspicious of policies both at the national and regional (EU) levels, together with the denunciation of the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres (Liboreiro, 2022; Statewatch, 2022).

The commemorative act is organized in Melilla mainly by the association Mec de La Rue, a non-profit association, whose name, Mdlr, is derived from the French expression used to refer to children of the streets, indicating its commitment to helping migrant youth in Melilla (Mec de La Rue, 2025). Founded thirty years ago, Mdlr is the only association still active on the border in Melilla today. Others conduct activities from the peninsular Spain, at times collaborating with Mdlr. From observation, however, this association appears to have been left

as the sole one in the effort to organize a commemorative act for the 24J on the border. As a result, it has been challenging for me as a researcher to contact the association and obtain information regarding activities organized.

The commemorative act in Lampedusa is organized by the non-profit organization, the Committee of the 3rd of October (Comitato Tre Ottobre). However, in 2025 the Committee was supported by third party funding from the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai (Comitato Tre Ottobre, 2025). Importantly, since its inception, the Committee has referred to the day as the “Day of Remembrance and Hospitality” (Giornata della Memoria e dell’Accoglienza), in contrast to the official institutional designation of the “National Day in Remembrance of the Victims of Immigration.” This choice already shows the importance of meaning in speech acts. The Committee’s terminology foregrounds Lampedusa as a place of hospitality and relational encounter, linking remembrance to a space of welcome. By contrast, the institutional denomination frames the event through the lens of “victims of immigration,” reproducing an imaginary in which immigration itself is constructed as the cause of tragedy as the victims are “of” immigration. This framing implicitly reinforces the idea of immigration as a problem or an issue creating its victims, something that the Committee’s vocabulary does not convey here. The commemorative acts of 2025 converged into one event, “Active Memories” (Memorie Attive), which took place over four days from the 30th of September 2025 to the 3rd of October 2025. The event was organized in collaboration with high schools across Italy and other European countries, including Germany, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom. While the event organized by the Committee on the 3rd of October was focused on youth and engaging with high school students, anyone could participate in these activities. **Methodology**

Methods of Data Collection

The data collection method consisted of three steps: first, data was collected during the initial contact with organizations on the ground. This first step consisted of establishing initial contact with the organizations involved in the commemorative acts, which was limited to logistical exchanges (e.g., confirming dates, locations, and access) and did not involve interviews as my analytical focus is on the public commemorative acts articulated, rather than on organizers’ interpretations of these acts. Secondly, I conducted observations of the commemorative acts’ organization a few days before they took place to understand the nature of the people and associations involved, as well as the specific activities planned. Lastly, I conducted observations and recorded notes during the commemorative acts. This last step allowed me to collect data for the analysis of these commemorative acts as narrative. As a result, the analysis relies on ethnographic observation of commemorative acts, fieldnotes, and publicly accessible materials

(such as organizations' post on their websites and social media channels), consistent with the study's aim to examine the narratives performed in situ during the commemorative acts.

Methods of data analysis

My aim in this study is to analyze both speech acts and rituals throughout the selected commemorative events. Speech acts are considered in this study as linguists define them, namely "central units of communication, with phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic properties" (Green, 2017) through which a speaker forms statements. I conduct a claim analysis, examining specific statements in speech acts. I draw on the framework of "crisis as claim" (Marino & Ruedin, 2023) which, to investigate a claim making in-depth, identifies an actor that makes the claim in the name of a group and an argument made in support of their idea. These identified actors within the framework can be associated with what semiotic analysis defines as the addresser (claim-maker) and the message (the argument) (Catalano, 2011). Studies utilizing semiotic analysis focus in-depth on the message and how it is delivered effectively through specific devices. Some of the most common devices used in speech acts are a. repetition, b. personal experiences, c. metaphor and d. metonym (Catalano, 2011). In my claim analysis, drawing on semiotic analysis, I focus on these specific devices and how the makers utilize them. My analysis, however, focuses on speech acts as well as rituals (symbolic acts that are not of speech).

Melilla: the #24J

The commemorative act took place first at the border crossing of Barrio Chino, where Maite Echarte Mellado, representative of the association Mdlr, made the first set of statements, followed by other colleagues. In these speech acts, there were important claims regarding what happened on the 24th of June 2022 and what is now (24th of June 2025) imperative to do. The occurrence was talked about as "a massacre of human lives of migrants of Sudanese origin." The aim of this commemorative act at the border was clearly stated: "we are here because the facts must be known so that what happened on that day is never repeated." The association declared that they will "continue to demand justice, reparation, and an official version of the events" and that "it is imperative to demand justice, that the public authorities know that black, migrants, and poor people's lives matter, to demand human dignity."

Throughout the commemorative act, the border image took a central role: another representative of the association metaphorically described it as "A line that tells a story of division between them and us" and stated the need for this act of remembrance, "so that the *I* becomes smaller and smaller and the *we* becomes bigger and bigger." This metonym was used to communicate the desire to construct a larger and stronger community within civil society,

one that is committed to “building bridges and extending a helping hand” rather than “erecting walls through indifference and detachment.” This first set of speech acts reports a narrative shift: what happened is framed not as an isolated tragedy but as evidence of a violent border regime. The focus on justice, truth, and accountability re-politicizes the massacre and resists its narrative as one crisis driven occurrence.

After the speeches of two representatives of the association, the names of the people killed on the 24th of June 2022 were read aloud, together with prayers. Flowers were attached to the gates of the entrance to the border post of Barrio Chino. The commemorative act did not only have a component of speech: there were specific rituals with symbolic meaning. Meeting at the border in front of the wall where the massacre took place in Barrio Chino before going to the city center to continue the commemorative act had a strong underlying message: the people present were given flowers to hang on the walls of Barrio Chino, connecting the act to the ritual of honoring the death of dear and loved ones. In 2025, people could hang flowers on a digital wall, replicating the wall of Barrio Chino, on an online platform. These rituals materially intervene in the *borderscape*. By transforming the fence and the Barrio Chino gate into memorial sites, civil society gives a new meaning to spaces associated with exclusion, securitization and militarization.

The second part of the commemoration took place in the afternoon in the central square of Plaza Menendez Pelayo, where more people could easily reach the location and thus participate. In the square, other representatives of the association and civil society members were given space to intervene. A moment of silence was held to honor the victims, as participants gathered to reflect on the lives lost to border violence. The gathering served not only as a commemorative act but also as “expression of solidarity with migrants seeking to exercise their fundamental right to mobility”. It was “a call to denounce the harsh and dehumanizing policies that inflict suffering and diminish our shared humanity.” These restrictive European measures, the statement emphasized, “deprive societies of the hospitality and cultural richness that come from welcoming those who travel across our lands.” Migration is thus depicted as an opportunity, and Melilla is presented as a place of a predominantly positive crossing: migration seen through the experience of some civil society members who share their personal experiences. This image contrasts with the portrayal of institutional actors, which consider the geography of Melilla as a crossing region, a region of mobility perceived more as a hazard rather than a characteristic that can bring opportunities for the community’s development and wealth.

“Thirty-seven people lost their lives, more than seventy-seven people disappeared and hundreds were brutally beaten – suffocated, humiliated, and expelled at the fence that separates Nador, Morocco, from Melilla, Spain.” What happened on the day is remembered and embraced by a second intervention, “[...] the victims were not ‘illegal migrants’ or ‘human avalanches,’ they were people. Young men, mostly Sudanese, fleeing armed conflict, hunger, abandonment, and structural violence caused, among other things, by colonialism, plunder, and wars fueled by global interests.” The claim-maker urged the audience to ensure that these migrants’ names and stories live on. The claim-maker underlines how, “[...] instead of refuge, Europe’s borders confronted them with death, oppression, and neglect.” The claim-maker addressed here the audience, bringing experiences of people on the move (who were present and intervened). Migrants were humanized as such, their collective story of escaping violence in Sudan told and underlined more than once throughout the day, while Spanish and EU governance denounced. This narrative strategy shows how memory can be multidirectional: the experiences of Sudanese migrants are linked to broader historical contexts of colonial exploitation, global inequality, and structural violence. The commemorators foreground here the occurrence’s systemic causes.

There were specific claims condemning the brutality of the border and the need to act so that the responsible people for the deaths and violent acts against migrants can be held accountable: this is seen as a first step towards a more just governance at the Spanish and EU level. “Today we denounce the impunity [...] The Spanish justice system closed the case without determining responsibility. No one has been tried or convicted. [These human beings’] deaths remain unpunished while their families continue to seek answers.” The claim-makers did not discuss or call into question the role of Moroccan authorities as they focused on the Spanish and EU governance. One representative denounced European and Spanish responsibility in the externalization of borders through agreements with Morocco, agreements “that delegate migration control to a country that does not respect fundamental rights, turning borders into lawless zones.” Rather than accepting claims that portray deaths as unfortunate accidents, the commemorators identify specific actors and policies as responsible, restoring agency to the victims and assigning responsibility to specific institutions. The representatives demanded transparent agreements with third countries and the end of bilateral agreements with Morocco. EU migration governance was heavily criticized and presented as an example of systemic – and other forms of – racism:

The borders of Spain and the EU have become increasingly militarized and violent. They have turned into spaces of death. We denounce the institutional racism that normalizes these

deaths, as well as racism in all its forms, which threatens the lives of migrants at the border. The massacre in Melilla – Nador is a brutal expression of structural racism that criminalizes and dehumanizes.

This metaphor of the border as a space of death conveys to the audience an image of how these policies have been transforming the border space. The spoke-people of a civil society organizing to set a commemoration were here communicating that Melilla has been turned into a space of violence and death. The Melilla massacre is one example of this transformation: dead bodies of “people on the move seeking a more dignified life,” killed in a stampede after being “brutally attacked” by Moroccan police forces. The claims reported in the speech acts underline how these disruptions are generated by a specific border governance, by those in power, rather than by the people on the move crossing this border or arriving in this territory. There was also a deep criticism of civil society, which was described as mostly indifferent to the suffering of people on the move: “We [also] denounce the indifference with which society continues to witness the tragedy of those fleeing conflict and despair, while justifying policies of exclusion and repression.”

Importantly, there was a call for urgent action to reopen the case at the Spanish National Court “based on new evidence, witnesses, and testimonies, including the participation of international organizations such as the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants.” Action was urged to “demand the identification and return of the bodies” to the Spanish state and Morocco, which should “assume responsibility for locating, identifying, and returning the remains of the victims to their families, guaranteeing their rights to mourn and to the truth.” The association representatives demanded “full reparation for the victims and survivors.” This step was presented as a first step towards a more just response to managing movement in this territory. The representatives’ claim was that they need to “continue to demand truth, justice, and reparation for the victims of the 24th of June” as “at stake is not only memory, but the kind of society we are willing to be. What happened is not a tragedy; it is a crime.” Remembrance is seen as holding “in our hearts the many people who seek a more dignified life, who have the same right as us to live with the same dignity.” Civil society thus reconciled in the grief and mourning of fellow humans who received the community’s cherishment of their lives and deaths, denied by the authorities through the massacre and the breach of their rights as human beings. Taken together, these speech acts and rituals narrate the massacre as a crime rooted in structural racism and specific policy choices and reclaim the *borderscape* as a space of political claim making, collective mourning and solidarity.

Lampedusa: Active Memories

The event “Active Memories” started on the 30th of September with two roundtables exploring the concept of “legacy” of migration as well as migrant and diaspora activism. Institutional figures together with the president of the Committee 3rd of October introduced it as the word was given to several claim-makers. In the words of Cardinal Zuppi, commemoration is the moment in which “memory becomes choice, awareness, wisdom, precisely so as not to repeat past mistakes”. The Cardinal conveyed a generally hopeful message claiming that active memories through the act of commemorating help escaping the “globalization of powerlessness and indifference” through “small gestures that make the difference.” Cardinal Zuppi employs a metaphor stating that “we must not allow ourselves to be imprisoned by fear, prejudices, by these invisible walls that exist between us, between peoples, due to a wounded history.” Through statements infused with Catholic symbolism, he encouraged to put aside this past to recognize that we have the same dreams, the same hopes, that there are no enemies, only brothers and sisters. Lampedusa and its residents were depicted in his speech act as “your beautiful island, a bulwark of humanity which despite obvious problems, caused by a phenomenon of gigantic proportions (i.e. migration), never lost humanity, respect for others, and care.” Such statements perpetrate the idea of Lampedusa as the island of solidarity and of migration as an issue, reinforcing a depoliticized understanding of border deaths, shifting attention away from structural causes and toward moral appeals for compassion.

The evening roundtable was introduced by a representative of the Committee who describes the title of the event as a claim: “Active Memories.” The roundtable gave space to people “who have experienced migration firsthand,” “[...] those who are living daily this heritage.” One interviewee, who at the time of arrival at Lampedusa was a non-accompanied minor, described what he remembered as a feeling of regret and melancholy together with the experience of a recurrent nightmare of no longer being able to go to school. We see here the use of detailed personal experiences to better convey a message. From the young people taking part in the roundtable came also the most critical voices: one activist resident in Italy, who had migrated as a non-accompanied minor, underlined the meaning of the concept of legacy as “awareness” and “memory” for the migrant who came across the Mediterranean to be a voice, thus carrying the weight of those who did not make it. This interviewee emphasized the persistent bordering process migrants undergo which goes beyond the physical border, mentioning the struggle of getting a residence permit and later the Italian citizenship. By linking the shipwreck to ongoing bureaucratic violence, we see here again remembrance that is multidirectional, connecting past to present forms of exclusion within the Italian state.

On the first of October, one roundtable was dedicated to the theme of “remembrance and neglect.” The president of the Committee, the claim-maker in this speech act, explained how its aim has been through the years to identify the dead, give an identity to the people dead at sea. From the identification of the dead comes another crucial step for the Committee and the families of the missing: “a proper burial that would dignify the dead as human beings,” in the words of one Committee representative. Here again we see again an efficient use of personal narrated experience to connect with the audience. The president underlined the strong willingness to continue identifying the dead at sea to give “peace to the families,” mentioning that, “[...] people still have no peace today. I know mothers who live on medication to be able to continue living, to seek answers that we are unwilling to give, even in death. It is almost as not accepting them alive nor dead [talking about people on the move crossing the Mediterranean].” Commemoration here enacts restorative justice: the act of naming, identifying, and burying the dead challenges the institutional erasure of migrant deaths in the central Mediterranean. This memory work has the potential to transform the sea from a site of disappearance into a site of accountability.

On the same evening, a roundtable was dedicated to the theme of solidarity and was introduced by Italian journalist Nancy Porsia, claiming that “we began to witness this phenomenon of mass migration which changed the terms of social bargaining between the North and South of the world”; and “[...] for years there was only exploitation [meaning exploitation of the Global South], and at a certain point we started to see the effects [meaning mass migration] so we said no.” Through this narrative, the journalist perpetuated a Eurocentric perspective on migration towards Europe, a “mass” phenomenon directed from the African continent towards the European one, consequence of past European misdeeds in the Global South, entity which is generalized and never discussed in more detail. The word was then given to a representative of Open Arms who reflected on the distorted way in which NGOs operations at sea have been depicted through the years – be in mainstream media or statements by politicians and institutions. The representative stated a preoccupation with the future as narratives of criminalization have “become real accusations.” These accusations have consequences, namely that they come to “truly undermine the basis of our European constitutional charters, that is, undermining solidarity.”

On the third of October, in the early morning, at 2h45 am, people gathered at the New Hope Memorial for the mourning vigil to honor the people who died at sea the same date in 2013. The vigil was set at 3h00 am, time when the boat started sinking in October 2013. The vigil can be considered here a form of embodied memory: by synchronizing the ritual with the

moment of the shipwreck, participants collapse temporal distance and re-experience the event as an ongoing wound. This ritual anchors memory in the body and in place, reinforcing the *borderscape* as a site of collective mourning. At 9h00 am the same morning, participants marched to the Gateway to Europe where they arrived around 10h00 am. Here, the commemorative act started with a speech by Kheit Abdelhafid, Imam of Catania who declared:

Today we gather for a moment of remembrance, grief, and shared responsibility—we remember the tragedy of the third of October, when, not far from here, 368 innocent men, women, and children lost their lives, seeking a chance for a better future through the Mediterranean, a sea that should be of encounter between peoples but has too often become a graveyard for our brothers and sisters

He connected the injustices encountered by people on the move in the mediterranean with the situation in Gaza, Palestine, to gain attention from the audience and underline the relevance of such a commemorative event after 12 years from the shipwreck of the 3rd of October: the aim is defined as remembrance to give dignity to human life but also not to stop in this search for justice, for not only people on the move keep dying at sea but also hundreds of kilometers from the Mediterranean innocent civilians “brothers and sisters” are “murdered” in the indifference of the international community. This analogy highlights how these deaths of human beings are caused and protracted by indifference. By linking the 3 October shipwreck to violence in Gaza, the Imam also enacts multidirectional memory, situating Lampedusa within a global geography of suffering and institutional abandonment. This statement also expands the commemorative horizon beyond the national state framework and situates the island as part of a transnational moral community. The intervention of Adal Neguse Wedafrash followed. Adal, who lost his brother at sea, thanked the Committee and the participants in the activities, particularly the young students, stating:

Let’s not forget that we all are human beings first. As one of my brothers put it yesterday, the things that unite us are far greater than the things that separate us. Don’t ever forget this. And the following message is directed especially to the students: we believe in you, you are the future, future policymakers, you are the future lawyers, and you are the future politicians, we believe in you, you can make a change.

Such an appeal to future generations portrays commemoration potentially as a pedagogical project, a tool to shape civic responsibility and to challenge/resist the normalization of border violence. The emphasis on youth underscores the forward-looking dimension of the commemorative act, linking past tragedy to future political agency.

The names of the people dead at sea on the third of October were then read aloud and those attending were given flowers and crowns of flowers which they threw in the Mediterranean Sea, still the cemetery of most of the victims. The dead was thus mourned through a commemorative act which reminds us of one of a funeral, the presence of crown of flowers is indicative of this. Through these rituals, the commemorative act transforms the Mediterranean from a space of disappearance into a funerary landscape, asserting the right of the dead to be mourned and remembered.

Similar Aims, Different Means

The two commemorative events differ deeply in the way they are organized. The commemorative event that took place in Melilla on the 24th of June was organized by one association and lasted one day. The organizational setting was one of assumed locality and familiarity with the event. The audience was not numerous and not many representatives of Melilla's civil society – not linked to the association – took part. On the other hand, the commemorative event in Lampedusa was organized as a set of activities on four days – from the 30th of September to the 3rd of October. The activities were organized by the Committee for the Third of October (Comitato Tre Ottobre), and the financial resources were provided by a third-party funder, a transnational religious organization. The activities were organized mainly for outsiders – despite the involvement of many Lampedusa residents – and especially young outsiders: much effort was put in contacting high schools to let young students participate, making high school students were the primary target. Nevertheless, the audience was diverse. A comparative analysis of the speech acts analyzed reveals insights regarding a. how the traumatic event is remembered; b. who is responsible and to held accountable for what happened; c. what is to do now and what are the next steps and aims of the act; d. who are those who participate in “what is to do now,” namely who is part of the community that the commemorative act aims to unite. In Melilla, representatives of the Mdlr association are the main claim-makers and they refer to the occurrence, the traumatic event at the border as a “massacre” by police forces, made possible and implemented by Moroccan, Spanish and EU governance. There are thus clearly defined responsible people for the occurrence of the “massacre” of migrants at the border: massacre is a word that calls for an agent, a responsible, defined as the act of “killing a lot of people” in a way that is brutal and indiscriminate (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). For the “killing of,” there is a supposed “killer” to be held accountable. In Lampedusa, representatives of the committee were not the only claim-makers and institutional actors were involved in naming the traumatic occurrence which was defined as “a tragedy”. A tragedy is a “calamity, a disastrous event” which happens by “misfortune”

and does not necessarily have to be carried out by a responsible (Merriam Webster, 2025). These claims report a much more vague, less concrete enemies even when there is a slight attempt to reflect on culpable behavior (e.g., “lives broken by indifference and policies”). In both cases, however, we can analyze speech acts that report the righteousness of the people commemorating and the local community in face of a broader evil – be it more or less concrete. When looking at the message conveyed on what is to be done and the next steps, in the case of Melilla we see a strong denunciation of the current status quo and the claim of an urgent need to restart investigations regarding what happened on the 24th of June 2022. There is a claim on the need to restore justice. When analyzing the case of Lampedusa, we see an effort in dignifying the people that lost their lives at sea through the constant work of the committee: the need is to continue identifying the people that die at sea to, at least, give them dignity in death. In both cases, we saw an effort in reclaiming migrant identities as local identities in the two border societies.

The communities that are involved in the commemorative act and the potential audiences also differ: in the case of Lampedusa, we see a clear effort in engaging with a targeted audience, young students from different high school in Italy and beyond (mostly central Europe). This involvement was possible thanks to the resources available to the committee. We also witness the involvement of diverse institutions to unify diverse people in one audience. This institutional involvement entails a compromise on the message delivered. In the case of Melilla, the involved association Mdlr was not funded by third parties and was the main claim maker throughout the commemorative act: as a result, the message conveyed was less of a result of negotiation and compromise, but might also have appealed to a more specific, reduced audience. In Melilla, in addition, the presence and engagement of the military have an active role in constraining civic participation. A vacuum of civic engagement allows for further militarization and lack of contestation because there is no civic willingness to mobilize.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I investigate the ways in which border crises, which constituted a precedent in these two borderlands of the EU, are narrated through commemoration. I understand commemoration, and the acts that compose it, as narrative. This narrative is composed of messages, or claims, delivered through speech acts and rituals. Commemoration in these borderlands plays a crucial role in unifying a community at the border. As a result, these commemorative acts put the emphasis on the collective border memory rather than on a national state or EU collective memory of the events. Migration and people on the move are part of this collective memory and of the community at the border: through the acts, migrant identities are

reclaimed as local identities in the two *borderscapes*. Through this emphasis, the acts thus challenge the approach of methodological nationalism framing the Mediterranean region primarily through state-centered imaginaries, an approach which we encounter both in media and institutional representation of the border but even in scholarship on migration, border studies and memory and commemoration studies.

The comparative analysis conducted shows differences in organization of the two events and in the quality of the actors involved in the commemorative act. As a result, there are differences in some of the claims made in the speech acts, as well as in the potential reach and impact of the events. In Melilla, the one association Mdlr organized a local event, which presented claims naming explicit culprits, perpetrators of the Melilla massacre, and demanding justice. In Lampedusa, the organization of the event spanned multiple days, funded by third parties. These activities included institutional actors and emphasized youth education. The traumatic event at the border was claimed as a “tragedy”, and speech acts and rituals focused more on dignifying the dead, which we also see in Melilla, rather than identifying culprits for the dead in the Mediterranean.

Such commemorative acts illustrate how *borderscapes* are not only shaped by these events but also by the way these are narrated and remembered in their protracted aftermath. I advance the argument that, despite some difference in means and message, these commemorative acts play a key role in resisting a cycle of sensationalism surrounding such events – and brought forward by mainstream media and institutional portrays – by insisting on the act of remembering and by talking about the occurrences while connecting the past to the present – presenting a continuity.

This analysis shows how in Melilla, the commemorative act focused on accountability and resistance, while in Lampedusa, the act stressed the importance of reaching out to the youth and of giving dignity to the human beings deceased at sea. These commemorative acts have either pointed out the need for accountability in border governance or broadened participation through some compromise. It is evident that commemorative acts cannot come to be as neutral: they are contested spaces where a community has the potential to negotiate the way a traumatic event is narrated and remembered, and how it intertwines with its identity. In this sense, commemorative acts become part of the *borderscape*: they reshape the meaning of the border by linking past disruptions to present struggles, and by offering alternative narratives that resist the *invisibilization* of the border community, of which migration and people on the move are part.

Taken together, the two case studies reveal how bordering practices and border imaginaries are produced, contested, and re signified in Mediterranean *borderscapes*. In Melilla, commemorative acts expose the racialized and colonial legacies embedded in a fortified EU land border, where violence, and *invisibilization* structure everyday bordering. In Lampedusa, commemorative practices highlight a humanitarian security regime in which rescue, mourning, and spectacle coexist, shaping imaginaries of the Mediterranean as both a space of death and a site of moral responsibility. What is distinctive about the approach developed in this piece is that it examines bordering not through policy or media narratives, but through commemorative acts of actors re-shaping the narrative of occurrences through memory over time. By analyzing these acts as narrative practices, the article shows how local actors articulate narratives that resist dominant framings of crisis, securitization, and humanitarian victimhood, thereby expanding existing scholarship on *borderscapes*, memory, and migration. Crucially, the commemorative acts examined here foreground the temporal depth of narrative (through sustained remembrance) at a moment when public narratives of migration have become increasingly sensationalist and shaped by rapid cycles of media reportage.

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Booklet

Thinking Outside the Border

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Abstract

“Thinking Outside the Border” is a publication created by taking inspiration from the homonymous event that took place in Paris on November 26, 2023, organized by Anna Marino with the collaboration of Alessandra Polidori, researchers based at the National Centre for Competence in Research (nccr on the move) and the Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies (SFM). In line with the event's aims, this publication intends to disseminate research on the role of borders and bordering processes in societies while also referring to the on-site experience and activism of Simone Gavazzi, publication's co-author, human rights activist and editor at Penshare: it presents reflections on the construction and evolution of borders and, in particular, Lampedusa and the central Mediterranean as borders of the European Union. Through this publication, we aim to present an analysis to academic and non-academic audiences alike: Arianna Sisani's illustrations will take the readers through a visual journey, transporting them to Lampedusa, the Mediterranean, Simone's on-site experiences and Anna's theoretical and normative reflections.