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The 'permanentification' of a regime of crisis: reinforced and enduring bordering and normalization of right-wing narratives

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In public and political discourses, 2015 was constructed as the peak of a 'refugee crisis.' While a crisis is supposed to be temporary by definition, it seems that many references to migration have since been associated with the label 'crisis.' We argue that a 'permanentification' of a regime of crisis has been taking place over the last years. We use the term 'permanentification' in the sense of a process by which a state of exception is normalized and enduring. This can be observed in two key dimensions, each with significant consequences: on the one hand, exceptional measures have become routinized, institutionalized, and normalized; on the other hand, right-wing narratives have been mainstreamed to an unprecedented degree. Taken together, these dynamics reinforce existing necropolitics, institutionalize violence, and deepen exclusion.

In public and political discourses in Europe and perhaps beyond, 2015 represents the quintessential example of how a 'crisis narrative' related to human movement has been produced. Some political actors, among whom many right-wing – such as the [PiS in Poland](#) – framed this 'crisis narrative' around supposedly high numbers of people crossing borders and

the 'threat' they assumably pose to European societies. While they talked of a 'migration crisis,' other actors framed it as a 'refugee crisis' or turned the angle and talked critically about a 'crisis of solidarity', a 'crisis of Europe' or 'of the European project' rather than *in* Europe; for example by putting forward limited reception capacities or the enhanced risks of border deaths referring to databases by the IOM or social scientists. Yet, while all these examples differ in their representation of what the 'crisis' was about and who was responsible for it, they agreed in it being a crisis. Indeed, we can conclude that a regime of crisis implicating differently positioned actors has emerged and become widely accepted.

Emergence and acceptance of a 'migration crisis' narrative

Of course, it was not the first time that human movements have been problematized and related to a 'crisis.' One only has to think about the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, when asylum systems in Europe were overwhelmed, or about the Second World War, when the by-then Swiss minister of justice declared 'the boat being full' for Jewish refugees who tried to escape the Nazi regime. That migration is securitized, exceptionalized, or criminalized is nothing new. On the contrary, in a nation-state logic, movements across national borders are *per se* a potential problem and considered abnormal. While these legacies are important, 2015 might symbolize a turning point as the 'crisis' label proliferated and became firmly anchored in public and political representations and institutions. The 'crisis' narrative was since taken up innumerable times to represent human movements and to justify border closures and mobility restrictions; for instance, during the peaks of the Covid-19 pandemic or in the case of Ukrainian refugees after the Russian invasion. We argue that a new turn can be observed more recently: this regime of crisis has undergone a process of what we call a 'permanentification,' where a state of exception becomes normalized and enduring, a shift that carries specific and far-reaching consequences.

Taking a pragmatist and constructivist approach, we consider crises as the product of specific bureaucratic, political, and technologically mediated practices and representations. As we argue, independent of any purportedly 'objective' reality, it is the framing of particular social issues as 'crisis' through public and political problematization that gives them their social reality and enables specific actions. As 'critical junctures', 'crises' are presented as extraordinary situations in which urgent measures need to be introduced. In that sense, we consider, as did other scholars before us, the productivity of crisis declarations. Therefore, we aim to contribute to the work that denaturalizes the crisis label and repoliticizes the underlying conditions.

This pragmatic approach helps us reveal two important layers of the 'permanentification' of this regime of crisis: First, as we argue, this permanentification enables exceptional and temporary crisis measures to persist over time, thereby strengthening migration control and bordering. Second, through the framework of deservingness, the crisis label aligns so-called progressive forces with right-wing populists, thereby normalizing right-wing discourses in European societies in new ways.

The 'permanentification' of the regime of crisis

By evoking a certain 'exceptionality,' crises are contrasted with a supposed 'normality' and hence supposed to be definite and finite moments in time. To overcome the crisis and return to 'normality,' a crisis thus calls for urgent and extraordinary measures. Regarding human movements, the measures taken are based on an assumed 'threat' posed by those called 'migrants.' Although this framing has previously existed, as emphasized by many scholars, its conjunction with a crisis narrative intensifies the perception of the assumed 'threat,' thereby legitimizing the immediate expansion of border surveillance, deportations, and other forms of migration control. For example, the newly adopted European pact on migration and asylum provides countries with possibilities of exemption from regular rights protections, in which they can be released from some legal obligations regarding asylum in case of crises or 'weaponization' of migration by another

country or a non-governmental entity.

A 'permanentification' of the regime of crisis, as the title of this blog post suggests, thus sounds like an oxymoron. However, it seems that human movement labeled as migration has been continuously conflated with crisis since 2015 (at least). By using the term 'permanentification,' we aim to underline our constructivist perspective on crisis and the permanentified use of this label. When looking more closely at the measures taken, responses to the declared 'migration crisis' highlight the permanent character it has taken in two ways.

(a) Normalization, routinization and institutionalization of 'temporary' emergency responses

First, measures applied as crisis responses are often not new *per se* but already exist in some form and find new ways of implementation in an emergency situation. For instance, the 'hotspots' created in Greece and Italy in 2015 – filtering camps at the borders of Europe – were presented as an emergency response to the increased number of people arriving in these countries. The genealogy of these institutional devices, however, reveals a continuity with existing logics, as hotspots **fit into previous reforms of the Italian reception structures** and into a broader movement of Europeanization of border management. Another example is the measures taken in Switzerland regarding asylum procedures during the Covid-19 pandemic that echo the **'Border Medical Service' (Grenzsanitätsdienst)** introduced after the First World War. **With the aim to shield the 'national body' from an assumed 'hygienic risk' by foreigners, medical tests were carried out in the name of this service.**

Second, some measures were rationalized under a crisis rhetoric and explicitly applied as emergency legal instruments. Yet, they are often incorporated into effective law and hence institutionalized once the crisis is declared over. In Switzerland, for example, amendments to the Asylum or Migration Act are at times adopted by parliament in the form of federal decrees and later integrated into the law's revision. Similar phenomena can be observed in other contexts, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the emergency decrees **paved the way to introduce anti-sex work policies, particularly affecting migrant sex workers.** In brief, besides the continuous use of the crisis label by many actors, the temporal expansion of the crisis measures into the past and into the future illustrate how the crisis label is mobilized and how a 'permanentification' of the regime of crisis is taking place.

(b) Normalization and mainstreaming of right-wing extremist discourses

The continuous mobilization of the crisis label leads to the normalization of right-wing narratives within and across societies. As **the first contribution of this blog series shows**, European 'mainstream' has gotten closer to the right-wing Hungarian migration politics as their tactics of mobilizing the crisis label to introduce national 'emergency' measures has been adopted by other European countries and is even facilitated through recent amendments of EU regulations. This normalization, as we argue, is the result of an alignment of so-called progressive and reactionary forces and occurs through the mobilization of the framework of deservingness.

'Deservingness,' a representation deeply anchored in national and European border regimes, allows for the distinction, filtering, and sorting of people trying to access Europe. This filtering implements **hierarchies of deservingness**; it sorts between 'real victims,' who have the right to be taken care of – in the sense of accessing state protection and resources; and others whose right to protection is denied because they are considered undeserving – *ergo* whose entrance to Europe and whose presence in European territory must be controlled and avoided. Of course, the definition of who is a 'real victim' is a highly contested issue, and the representation of deservingness is strongly gendered, racialized, and migrantized, as became plainly visible in the unequal treatment of refugees, with solidarity being limited to people represented as *white*, Christian Europeans **after Putin's full-scale invasion in February 2022.**

As we argue, logics of deservingness are exacerbated by this regime of crisis and becoming permanent, as we observe today. Even progressive forces, such as left-wing actors, who usually call for more generous politics towards so-called migrants, then advocate for stricter border controls and delivery of protection statuses, with the idea that people who are not recognized as refugees (hence who are not 'real victims') jeopardize the reception states' protection capacities. For example, Elisabeth Baume-Schneider, socialist politician and member of the Swiss Federal Council, initiated a derogatory and discriminatory 24-hour asylum procedure for Maghrebi asylum seekers in 2023 (picked up by Beat Jans, fellow party member and of the Swiss Federal Council, a year later). She argued that it would help to 'decongest' the asylum system in view of the shortage of accommodation in asylum centers. These actors believe that stricter control and triage will preserve resources considered as limited and will avoid or restrain the instrumentalization of the crisis by the far-right, who would like to dismantle the asylum system completely. This results in so-called progressive and/or centrist forces validating extremists' distorted discourse of 'threat' and 'abuse' posed by 'migration,' which reinforces the dichotomy between 'real and deserving victims versus the others.' For example, Swiss Green Liberals claim that asylum seekers who have a low probability of being granted a permit and commit crimes undermine the societal acceptance of the asylum system and affect the public's sense of security. They argue that the detention and deportation of 'delinquents' should be facilitated and that they should not leave this matter to the far-right Swiss People's Party, whose proposals often conflict with fundamental rights.

Although seemingly paradoxical, the validation of this discourse can be part of centrist's political strategy to win votes from the far right. Such is the case of the Swiss Liberal Party (FDP/PLR), or of the French centrist prime minister who adopted the discourse around migratory 'submersion.' At the same time, it can be part of the far-right's and extremists' own political strategy to actively align other parties' narratives on migration with their demands to push the overall discourse to the right and hence 'normalize' their claims as the leaked strategic documents for the federal elections of 2017 and 2025 of the German right-wing extremist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) reveal for instance.

The shift to the right of parts of the political spectrum is of course not limited to periods of 'crisis.' However, we argue that in a regime of permanent crisis any dramatic news story which can be 'migranticized' is treated as a small crisis, and used to bolster demands for stricter migration laws. Only recently, a tragic deadly knife attack on January 22, 2025, in Aschaffenburg, Germany, was instrumentalized for these ends and eventually preceded the motion breaking the so-called *Brandmauer* (firewall) of no collaboration with the far-right in the German parliament. In this sense, crisis enables an alignment between centrist (and even leftist) and far-right politics that can be hidden through different iterations of deservingness.

Conclusion: How can we contest this permanent crisis regime and its outcomes?

While focusing on the discursive level in this blog post, it must not be forgotten that these narratives enter the practices of migration enforcement. For instance, it has been shown how suspicion became the default mode upon assessment of a person's (un)deservingness, quickly leading to generalized undeservingness.

In the realm of migration governance, we can observe a tendency for basic human rights to be increasingly questioned and rendered ineffective after having been taken for granted for a while. The illiberalism and necropolitics – the politics of choosing who is let to die – of this governance have become very visible, not least through continued violence against people on the move. The permanentification of the crisis regime analyzed in this contribution is instrumental in these tendencies by allowing to reinforce existing necropolitics, institutionalize violence, and deepen exclusion. Therefore, the question remains how this regime can be contested.

While we do not have any solution at hand, we observe some potential that we would like to pinpoint, which makes us hopeful. First, the current situation brings up new alliances and solidarities, indicating that different visions are possible. An

example is the solidarities formed in numerous manifestations all over Germany after the abovementioned *Brandmauer-breaking motion*. Second, such solidarities and alliances are fundamental to making visible much needed counternarratives of migration. This means strengthening anti-nationalist discourses and transnational solidarities, shifting the focus back to social justice more generally, and developing new visions of how we would like to live together on this planet. This might also include returning to the work of scholars and activists who developed ideas on *open borders* and those who brought up ideas of *post-national citizenship*.

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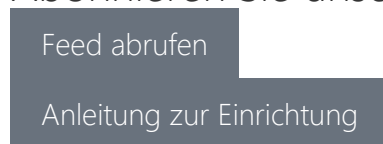
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