De Europa
Vol. 7, No. 1 (2024), 41-59
ISSN 2611-853X
www.deeuropa.unito.it

Contesting Europeanness at the Aegean border: a contrapuntal reading*

Daniela Huber

1. Introduction

The European project was originally conceived in a way that replaced "power with rules" (Kundnani 2023b), rooted in an evolving liberal civilian/normative identity (Duchêne 1973; Manners 2002) that has characterised European foreign policy since its inception in the 1970s. As Hans Maull (1989) noted, military power became a "residual instrument" with the focus primarily on civilian means and cooperation. The European Union (EU) was also imagined as a universal model that diffused multilateralism and a liberal, rules-based order into international politics, to be emulated by others. Thus, the EU became a major driving force of, and benefitted from, the so-called international liberal order, with all its limitations and myths (Acharya 2017). Today, however, this identity of the EU seems to be experiencing a rupture. No longer is the EU imagined as "the antithesis of geopolitics" (Kundnani 2023b); on the contrary, the von der Leyen (VDL) Commission has proclaimed a "geopolitical EU" (von der Leyen 2023) and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has argued on various occasions that the EU must relearn the "language of power" (Borrell 2020). The EU is also moving away from the civilian aspect identified by Maull, as it seeks to strengthen its shared defence and security.

An emerging literature and debate are grappling with what appears as a rupture in EU identity. An important part of this literature attempts to explain the 'why' of this rupture, typically through the loss of legitimacy the EU has suffered as its promise of "prosperity and peace" (Glencross 2021) has been undermined by the financial crisis, while "multiple insecurities" (Panebianco and Tallis 2022) have emerged over the EU's inability to deal with a wave of refugees, thousands of whom have died in the Mediterranean. The EU arguably appeared weak and found itself in a crisis of representation and in need of a new "narrative" for itself. It is particularly in such moments of crisis that identity appears de-stabilised and identity politics emerges in which various identity formations become possible; it becomes, for example, thinkable that the EU might increasingly buy into a narrative that has been promoted by populist voices

Daniela Huber, Università Roma Tre, danielaverena.huber@uniroma3.it

* Research for this article was supported by the EU's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme through the ITFLOWS project, under grant agreement No 882986. The author is particularly grateful for the trustful cooperation with the Spanish civil society organisation Open Cultural Center (OCC), which conducted 30 interviews with refugees in Greece in accordance with ITFLOWS data protection, ethics and gender guidelines. The author also appreciates the valuable feedback received from the guest editors and two anonymous reviewers, as well as the panel at the annual conference of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) in 2023 in Genoa. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/7134

on the far right. The latter no longer seeks to exit the EU but rather to re-shape it as an "ethnoregionalism—that is, an ethnic/cultural version of European identity analogous to ethnonationalism, which is closely connected to the idea of whiteness" (Kundnani 2023a), emphasising Europe's "civilizational distinctiveness".

The VDL Commission seems to have at least partially embraced such a formation of European identity. While migration has been securitised in the EU since the 1980s/90s as demonstrated by Huysmans's (2000) influential work, it has now also acquired central relevance in the identity of the EU with the "Geopolitical Commission", where it has become a pillar of its very constitution as a commission. President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, appointed an EU Commissioner for "Protecting" and later "Promoting our European Way of Life", whose portfolio includes migration. This move, as Hans Kundnani argued, made "the EU's civilizational turn explicit: migration is now seen not just as a difficult issue to be managed but as a threat to the European way of life" (Kundnani 2023a). While this identity formation currently appears dominant, it is also contested within EU institutions – in parliament, by member states, and by European civil society – as it risks "exposing cultural divisions between EU countries" (Glencross 2021) and within European migration societies. This very contestation holds the potential for other identity formations.

Rather than addressing the 'why' question, this article is interested in the 'how' question: How is the process of identity formation currently playing out in the European Union? Which "bundles of identifications" (Bucher and Jasper 2017) are becoming temporarily stabilised in a contested political discourse and enacted vis-à-vis others? What other possibilities and imaginations are evident in this process? To explore these questions, this article studies the evolving and politically contested process of identity formation in the EU in the area of migration, as the latter has become increasingly central to identity politics in the EU.

The article starts by examining the theoretical and conceptual framework, drawing on the work of David Campbell (1998) and adopting the approach of Bucher and Jasper (2017), which does not consider identity as fixed but instead explores "bundles of identifications" that might "acquire a temporarily privileged status within a specific discourse". It also incorporates a more explicitly contrapuntal perspective (Said 1993) to listen to marginalised, silenced or ignored voices in the discourse. The article then identifies the case study – namely, the first "migration crisis" of the VDL Commission in 2020 in the Aegean borderland of the EU – and outlines the methodology. It provides a contrapuntal reading of the crisis by investigating the discourse of EU policymakers, its contestation through civil society and the experiences and possible alternatives articulated by refugees in the broader Aegean borderland. The conclusions highlight the findings: EU policymakers articulate and enact the EU as deterrence, bundled with the EU as humanitarian compassion. EU civil society contests this discourse, articulating the EU as liberal and rules-based and insisting on the enactment of humanitarian compassion. The refugees mainly experience the EU as deterrence, less as humanitarian compassion and hardly as liberal and rules-based. They propose an alternative articulation of the EU as part of shared humanity, which acknowledges their agency.

2. The contested process of EU identity formation

Constructivists widely accept that identities are socially constructed and, therefore, never fixed; they typically view identity as "mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other" (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein Peter J. 1996, 56). While identity is never fixed, constructivists often acknowledge some degree of stability in identities and have introduced the concept of "ontological security" (Mitzen 2006) to describe the sense of continuity and stability states require in their identity or self-perception. The EU's sense of continuity has certainly been deeply questioned in the past decade, particularly through two developments. Firstly, on the international level, the international liberal order, which has been dominant since the end of the Cold War and in which the EU has thrived, is no longer the only, or even the main, game in town. As Amitav Acharya (2017) has highlighted, the world is becoming a multiplex, with various films on offer. This development challenges the EU's claim to universality, or more precisely, its assertion that the EU model is universally applicable. Secondly, the liberal model of the EU has been deeply challenged by the rise of Euroscepticism in the EU itself, promoted by nativist, ethnocentric, right-wing populist parties, which led to Brexit in the case of the UK. Meanwhile, the Hungarian and Italian cases show that, once in power, these parties do not typically seek to exit but rather aim to change the EU (Henley 2023), primarily through influencing EU migration policies.

Both developments have challenged the EU's ontological security and represented a crisis for what has long appeared as a stabilised formation of EU identity, which converged around the (international) liberal order. The temptation arose to make migration policy one of the main areas to articulate and enact EU identity, particularly as – D'Amato and Lucarelli (2019) have found – "migration has been at the center of attention of the European public and policymakers" with an "increasing normalisation of extreme and anti-immigrant claims" in European public spaces. The discourse of EU policymakers began to "[give] way to a more civilisational discourse based on the uniqueness of its culture" and "European values" (Kundnani 2021). Migration policy – to paraphrase David Campbell – has thus become a political discourse and practice that is now "central to the constitution, production, and maintenance" (Campbell 1998, 8) of EU identity.

Through migration policy, the EU demarcates what is inside/outside, self/other, domestic/foreign through a "stylized repetition of acts" that forms and maintains its identity; like foreign policy – with which it indeed increasingly intersects – it also acts as a "specific sort of boundary-producing political performance" (Ashley 1987, 51) both within the EU and in its borderlands. Campbell has pointed out that states have "no ontological status apart from the many and varied practices that constitute their reality, states are (and have to be) always in a process of becoming" (Campbell 1998, 11). This is particularly true for the European Union, a much newer construct than the Westphalian state. More so than in the case of a nation-state, we might refer to a "constitutive lack" of identity (Epstein 2011, 336). For the EU to maintain its *raison d'être* in the eyes of the European public, highly politicised migration crises might therefore

be rather useful as they provide a powerful instrument to maintain identification with the EU. While this helps us to understand why migration has moved to the centre stage of EU identity formation, it does not yet say much about how that formation evolves in a particular historical context and what specific form it takes. Given that the EU as "geopolitical" is a new articulation of EU identity, it is highly likely to be contested by those actors who form the backbone of an EU identity rooted in the liberal (international) order, namely European civil society organisations.

To better understand how "actors articulate, bundle and (temporarily and incompletely) stabilise interpretations of the 'self'" and how this is socially embedded in a process of contestation, this article adopts the approach proposed by Bucher and Jasper. They move away from the concept of stable or fixed identities to "bundles of identifications that acquire a temporarily privileged status within a specific discourse" (Bucher and Jasper 2017, 393) and view this as "a multidimensional process that is stabilised through the performance of political action vis-a-vis others" (Bucher and Jasper 2017, 396). Thus, the performance is not an outcome of a fixed identity but seeks to stabilise a proposed identity. This approach is helpful as it

> replaces the concept of identity with (multiple) acts of identification, which are bundled and temporarily and incompletely privileged (or marginalized) in the act of decision-making. Identification bundles thus appear as a multidimensional process that is stabilized through the performance of political action vis-a-vis others. (Bucher and Jasper 2017, 396).

This approach gives space to contestation in this process, but it focuses on actors with a stake in the discourse, even if their articulations might be sidelined (e.g. certain civil society organisations with an authoritative voice).

But how do marginalised or subaltern articulations enter into this process? This is a particularly pertinent question when studying migration. Migrants are not a faceless mass (Bleiker et al. 2013) whom we can deny "their subjectivity and actorness" (D'Amato and Lucarelli 2019). Rather, migrants also resist by enacting "their right to leave, move, survive and arrive" (Stierl 2016, 566), and they provide alternative imaginations of or identifications with the EU that can disrupt or destabilise what Bucher and Jaspers (2017) call temporarily and incompletely privileged acts of identification. Thus, studying their voices is crucial in migration societies. To address the challenge of inclusive 'reconstruction', Wolff et al. (2022) have proposed adopting Edward Said's contrapuntality as a key methodological tool. As Said pointed out, a contrapuntal reading means "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said 1993, 51). It includes what has been "forcibly excluded" (Said 1993, 67). Contrapuntal accounts can "powerfully dislodge" – to use a term by Ruba Salih (2017) – hegemonic discourses.

To read contrapuntally, Wolff et al. (2022) have suggested analysing the macro, meso and micro levels. The macro level refers to policymakers at the EU and member states' governmental levels. The meso level, instead, can focus on civil society groups, the political opposition or other actors (epistemic communities, multinational com-

panies etc.), depending on the topic researched. In the case of this research, civil society groups have emerged as the most vocal counterpoints to EU policymakers. Finally, the micro level includes marginalised voices along various intersections, including gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. Their voices help us to reflect on a certain discourse. For example, in the area of migration policies, for most (but not all) European citizens, acts of identification are performative but still abstract. For the refugees, however, their enactment is experienced in a physical way; their human bodies "must endure the most tangible side of this ambiguous structural effect" (Innico 2021, 381) of European acts of identification.

3. Reading contesting identifications with the EU contrapuntally

To read contrapuntally contesting identifications with the EU, how they are bundled and stabilised in (as well as experienced through) policies, and which alternatives might destabilise them, this study focuses on the 2020 migration crisis in the Aegean borderland. This is of interest since it was the first "migration crisis" faced by the VDL Commission (in office since December 2019, thus being three months in office) and the new right-wing Greek government led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis (elected in May 2019). As mentioned previously, such crises provide a political opportunity for policymakers to articulate and enact certain bundles of identification with the EU.

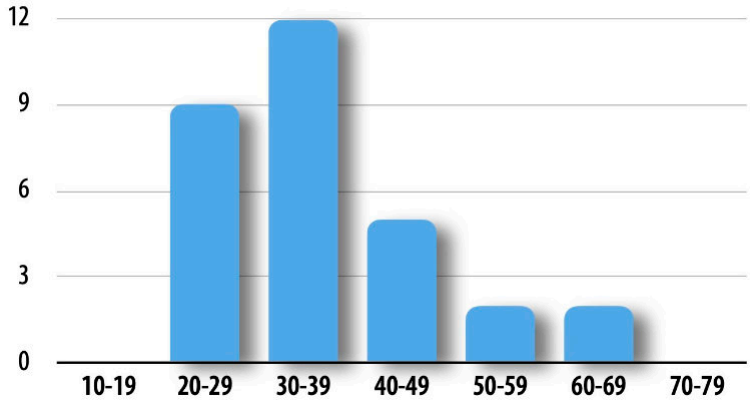
Furthermore, it is particularly interesting to study a "migration crisis" in the EU's borderlands where EU acts of identification are especially pronounced as these acts are about delineating borders between "self" and "other". Borderlands, as Raffaella del Sarto has pointed out, are areas "characterised by multiple and disaggregated borders with different degrees of permeability" (Sarto 2021, 3); borders are "institutions that govern inclusion and exclusion through the establishment and maintenance of different modalities of transboundary movement" (Sarto 2021, 15). However, the EU's border is by no means fixed or static. Rather, it is "fluid and shifting" (Brambilla 2015) and in a "constate state of becoming" (Vaughan-Williams 2016). Thus, studying contesting identifications within the EU, its borders and their role as social institutions in EU identity formation is of particular interest.

Thirdly, owing to its geography, the Aegean borderland is also a significant space in this respect, where the borders drawn in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1947 created not only a specific geography for migration but the Greek-Turkish dispute over national sovereignty recently intensified, while the EU has effectively outsourced migration management to Turkey. This particular borderland is, therefore, also intensely foregrounding questions of human and state security (Panebianco and Tallis 2022). It is not only a borderscape, that is, a space that is "at the same time continuously traversed by several bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic boundaries" (Brambilla 2015, 19) but also one where thousands of migrants have lost their lives.

In this particular space, this article adopts a contrapuntal approach to examine competing articulations of what it means to be European for the "Geopolitical Commission" at the macro level and for European liberal civil society organisations at the meso level present in the Aegean borderland. Although they are by no means the only actors in the European public space, they can be seen as the most vocal counterpoint in it. This analysis investigates central speeches and documents produced by these actors, responding to questions about what characteristics are central to EU identity, but also what borders and boundaries are drawn, who is represented as the other and how and what practices are articulated. The article then turns to the micro level to explore how a particular identification is bundled and temporarily stabilised in policies from the perspective of the "specific shapes" that it takes "in the livelihood of displaced people" (Innico 2021, 382). It questions how refugees experience the EU upon their arrival in Greece and how they resist and re-imagine what it means to be European from the margins.

This part of the research draws on 30 interviews conducted as part of the Horizon2020 Project ITFLOWS (another 60 interviews were carried out in Italy and Spain respectively, but this article focuses only on the interviews in Greece due to the chosen case study) between April and November 2021 by the Spanish civil society organisation Open Cultural Center (OCC) in three different locations in Greece (Polykastro, Thessaloniki and Samos) (see Okyay et al. 2021)[1]. The participants included 12 women and 18 men from various age groups (Figure 1), marital status (Figure 2) and legal status (Figure 3). The majority of them were from Syria (9), Iraq (8) and Afghanistan (6), with others from Iran (2), Pakistan (2), DRC (2) and Kuwait (1). Nine interviewees had arrived in Greece in 2018, 11 in 2019 and 10 in 2020. The 30 interviews initially focused on the refugees' experiences in their countries of origin, during transit and upon arrival. However, the analysis for this paper concentrated solely on their responses to questions related to their arrival in Greece.

Figure 1. Age group of interviewees



[1] Prior to analysis, the interviews were anonymised in a two-step procedure in line with the ITFLOWS data protection guidelines. The list of anonymised interviews is consultable in ITFLOWS deliverable 3.5, which is unpublished for data protection reasons. Interviewees who are cited directly in this article are identified by their gender, nationality and family status if relevant, but the codes linking them to the list of anonymised interviewees have been removed in the published article (an unpublished version read by two anonymous reviewers retains the codes).

Figure 2. Marital status of interviewees

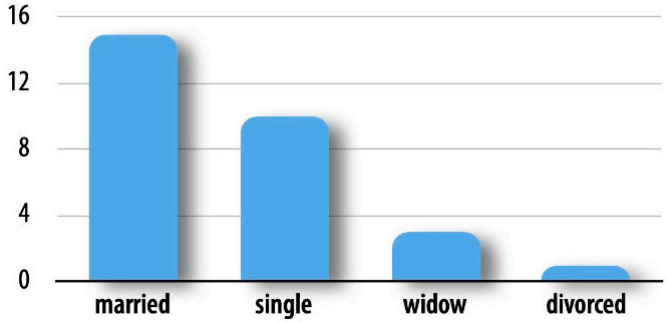
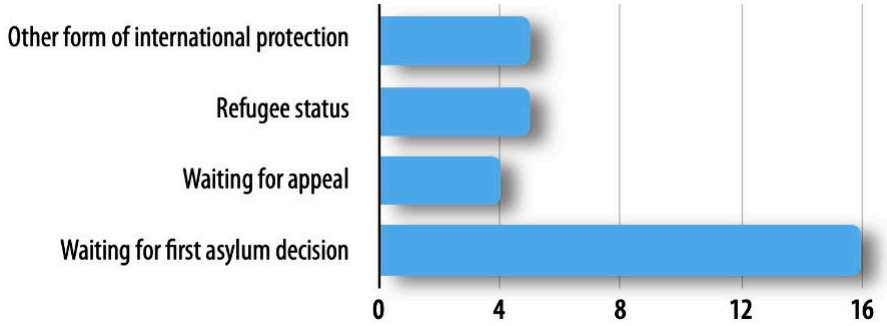


Figure 3. Legal status of interviewees



4. Articulations of Europeanness: EU as deterrence, as liberal and rules-based and as humanitarian compassion

The Greek-Turkish borderland had already been transformed into a highly fortified area before the "migration crisis" of 2020. Concerning Greece, Zaragoza-Cristiani highlights that, in 2016, the

> EU and the western Balkans countries began coordinating their actions, not only without considering Greece (an EU Schengen member), but actually taking measures to turn it into a ring-fenced buffer state. These measures gradually produced a bottleneck effect in which fewer and fewer migrants were able to cross the borders of the northern countries on the western Balkan routes, while more and more migrants remained stranded in Greece. (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017, 68).

Similarly, with the 2016 statement, Turkey was also turned into a gatekeeper or buffer state for the EU (Huber 2023; Maritato 2021). The 2020 crisis, however, showed how these states have constituted themselves in this environment (Karadağ 2019). In 2020, as Turkey and Greece engaged in brinkmanship in the Eastern Mediterranean over disputes surrounding their exclusive economic zones and as the conflict on the Turkish-Syrian border escalated, President Erdogan announced that Turkey would open its borders to allow refugees to enter Greece. Athens immediately securitised this situation, arguing that it represented an "active, serious, unusual, and asymmetric threat" to its national security (Türkeş-Kiliç 2023). Greece increased its border forces, suspended asylum applications for a month and, in a systematic vi-

olation of international law, violently pushed back thousands of refugees attempting to cross the Evros River.

During this first notable "migration crisis", Ursula von der Leyen, the then new head of the Commission, visited Greece. Vice President Margaritis Shinas pointed out just before her arrival how the crisis was viewed as a political opportunity for the new Commission, in which identification with the EU could be strengthened through a specific articulation of its identity: "This is a crisis, but it can also become an opportunity for Europe", "an opportunity that will allow us to defend collectively our external border" and "proceed with a broader reform of migration policy which is one of the most emblematic initiatives of the new Commission" (Schinas 2020). Once in Greece, at a joint press conference, von der Leyen (2020) described the situation as "extraordinary circumstances", thanking the border and coast guards "for their tireless effort" and stating that "[o]ur first priority is making sure that order is maintained at the Greek external border, which is also a European border". Thus, she did not mention the systematic push-backs but implicitly justified the severe violation of European and international law as actions taken under "extraordinariness" to restore "order". Furthermore, she used the incident to articulate identifications that portrayed the EU as unified in deterrence:

> The situation at our border is not only Greece's issue to manage. It is the responsibility of Europe as a whole. And we will manage it in an orderly way, with unity, solidarity and determination. Those who seek to test Europe's unity will be disappointed. We will hold the line and our unity will prevail. Now is the time for concerted action and cool heads and acting based on our values. Turkey is not an enemy and people are not just means to reach a goal. We would all do well to remember both in the days to come. I thank Greece for being our European *ασπίδα* [English: shield] in these times.

This invokes the EU as a unity that had previously been in crisis, particularly during the harsh austerity measures imposed on Greece. Furthermore, with "we will hold the line" and by framing Greece as the "European shield", the speech articulates an identification of the EU with deterrence, supported also by military means. The same articulation is provided by the Greek Prime Minister, who, at the same press conference, argued that "Greece is also doing Europe a great service. The border of Greece is the external border of the European Union. We will protect it" (Mitsotakis 2020).

Two principal others appear in the press conference: Turkey and the refugees. While neither Mitsotakis nor von der Leyen mention the flagrant violations of international law by the Greek border forces, they portray Turkey as responsible for them, luring the refugees "through false promises into this desperate situation" (von der Leyen 2020) and violating the EU-Turkey statement/blackmailing Europe/being a "migrant smuggler" (Mitsotakis 2020). The refugees are framed as "an asymmetrical threat against Greece's Eastern borders, which are also European borders" (Mitsotakis 2020). Ursula von der Leyen, by contrast, expressed "compassion for the migrants", which focuses less on framing the "other" and more on articulating an additional component of what it means to be European, namely being "compassionate". While

remaining silent on the violent push-backs of refugees, she seeks to portray the EU as humanitarian, acting "based on our values" (von der Leyen 2020). Thus, she adds a performative humanitarian compassion to the bundle of identification with the EU. As Panebianco has noted, the humanitarian dimension contrasts with the "dehumanization of migrants" and the "defense and closure of borders" and instead focuses on human security and "on migrants as individuals, in need of protection and searching for a better life" (Panebianco 2022).

The identification of European civil society organisations (EUCSOs) is complex, as they challenge the identification of the EU with deterrence while strengthening the association of the EU with humanitarian compassion. A wide range of EUCSOs have emerged in reception, search and rescue (Cusumano 2017; Stierl 2018). To elucidate what it means to be European for them, a joint letter from 120 EUCSOs – entitled "Protect our Laws and Humanity!" and published during the crisis when these organisations were physically attacked by single Greek citizens – has been analysed (along with single statements by key CSOs within this group). The letter highlights how this particular contestation centres on the question of what it means to be European. Specifically, the letter challenges the portrayal of the EU as focused on deterrence with an articulation of the EU as liberal and rules-based; it associates the EU with humanitarian compassion by seeking to shame the EU into compliance with its own performative discourse. The letter starts by recalling that

> the EU should assume substantial responsibilities for the protection of people on the move in a manner that demonstrates respect for human dignity and lawfulness and as a matter of shared responsibility among EU member states in the context of managing what is, first and foremost, a European issue. (120 Organizations 2020).

The letter explicitly criticises the framing of "vulnerable refugees" as "asymmetric threats", contests the deterrence logic (as also done by Amnesty and ECRE in separate statements) and insists on an identification of the EU with international law for the sake of the future of liberal democracies within the EU itself:

> We would also like to point out that the climate of panic and rhetoric of 'asymmetric threat'—also promoted by the authorities does not reflect reality and seriously affects not only vulnerable refugees—but also our society and the rule of law as a whole. … Applying such a regulatory provision is inhumane and illegal as it violates the fundamental principle of non-refoulement, incurs international responsibilities for Greece and endangers human lives. It is beyond dispute that Greece has the sovereign competence to control its borders and to manage any crossings there. Nevertheless, the right to seek asylum is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. (120 Organizations 2020).

The letter closes by urging the EU "to respect the law and safeguard European democratic values. Any further backsliding will have major consequences on European societies, European democracy and the rule of law" (120 Organizations 2020). Thus, the letter primarily addresses what it means to be European in the sense that a liberal, rules-based order generates broad consensus around which these

CSOs converge and which they seek to uphold in cooperation with international organisations that are pillars of the same order. Indeed, of the 120 EUCSOs, only a few (e.g. *Médecins Sans Frontières*) go beyond EU-defined norms and rules to argue for protection pathways.

In conclusion, the CSOs form the backbone of a different identification of the EU with the liberal, rules-based order. Their bundle of identification is also stabilised in policies as they highlight the extreme violation of rights, providing evidence for holding the EU and its member states accountable, for example, in national or European parliaments. In other words, they have "possibilities to radically democratize borderzones" (Stierl 2016, 574). At the same time, they are also part of the EU's politics of care and control (Dijstelbloem and van der Veer 2021) in its "geographies of humanitarianism" (Pallister-Wilkins 2020), which will be analysed next.

5. Experiencing and re-imagining Europeanness from the margins

In recent years, the Greek "hotspots" in the Aegean on Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos have been transformed into de facto detention centres with severe restrictions on the freedom of movement of refugees. In 2019, the new Greek government began its plans to replace them with "closed facilities" and in November 2020, the "EU granted 121 million euros for the construction of centres" on Samos, Kos, Leros, Chios and Lesvos (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2021).

Image 1. New "closed controlled access centre" at Zervou here

Credit: Wasil Schauseil / CC BU 4.0

These camps not only articulate but actually perform the EU as a combination of deterrence and compassion, control and care (Dijstelbloem and van der Veer 2021). As the Greek Prime Minister has argued, "if you go to Samos, you will find an impeccable tent with impeccable conditions funded by EU money with clean facilities with playgrounds ... for the children to play" (Mitsotakis 2021). By contrast, civil society organisation have described these centres as carceral spaces, "prison-like facilities" (Statewatch 2021), which segregate refugees from the rest of the population. As criticism from civil society and international organisations mounted, the Alternate Minister of Migration and Asylum asserted that "Greece cannot be at the same time a shield and accountable" (Koros 2021, 243). The camps provide "the necessary conditions for life" and effectively manage "disaster on behalf of states, and a wider global refugee-regime" (Pallister-Wilkins 2020, 1001, 999) but at the same time are spaces of exception where refugees are detained in inhumane conditions and their right to the liberty of movement is denied.

Beyond these official detention centres, there are also secret extrajudicial detention centres run by the Greek government to detain migrants before expelling them to Turkey (Stevis-Gridneff et al. 2020). While the Greek Prime Minister emphasises how many refugees have been rescued by Greece "every single day" (Mitsotakis 2021), illegal push-backs became a systematic practice during the COVID pandemic/crisis, when, "in near total invisibility" (Koros 2021), they witnessed an upsurge with 1,072 mass expulsions reported (Kingsley and Shoumali 2020). The new government, as Koros (2021) has pointed out, has made it a central, systematic tool. In the 89 incidents of illegal push-backs, affecting approximately

> 4,500 persons, recorded by the Border Violence Monitoring Network in the 2020 Annual Torture Report, almost 90% involved serious mistreatment and torture, while 52% of the victims were minors. More specifically, 89% of the incidents included excessive and disproportionate force, 10% included the use of Electric Discharge Weapons, 44% involved practices of forced undressing, 15% involved threats or violence by firearm and 19.7% inhuman treatment inside police vehicles, while the same treatment was observed regarding incidents where the victims were detained. (Koros 2021, 240).

In this, Greece was supported by the EU border agency. In 2022, OLAF, the European Union's anti-fraud agency, uncovered how FRONTEX had "covered up and helped to finance illegal push-backs of asylum-seekers in Greece" (Christides and Lüdke 2022). Thus, while deterrence (Rosina 2019) and performative humanitarianism (Pallister-Wilkins 2017) were already enacted before, in the 2020 "migration crises" they became systematic, as also evident in several journalistic investigations by *The New York Times* (Stevis-Gridneff et al. 2023).

This can also be seen in the refugees' daily lived experiences. The refugees interviewed in Greece are all survivors of previous significant traumatic events in origin and transit: the violence of civil war, patriarchal violence, trafficking, displacement, flight and the separation of families. However, for the majority of interviewees, this subaltern condition does not end there but – as Iole Fontana (2022) has termed the "human insecurity trap" – also continues in the arrival context.

5.1 Experiencing the EU as deterrence

The EU as deterrence emerges as the most dominant experience of the EU in the interviews with the refugees, characterised by the following themes or codes: state violence, inhumane living conditions, bare life, racism and waithood. **State violence**, including pull-backs from Turkey, push-backs from Greece and police violence in Greece, appears frequently in the interviews (8 refugees). One Afghan single man recounts a previous attempt to enter Greece: "The Greek police beat us very badly and took our telephones. Their faces, everything was covered. And they beat us a lot, exactly."

Almost all refugees report conditions contrary to humanitarian compassion, including **inhumane living conditions** with a lack of basic medical assistance, even for children. Parents are particularly concerned about the absence of schooling for their children. Refugees describe living on the streets or in the so-called "jungle", which is especially true for single men, but also families with children. An Afghan single man describes the "jungle" as follows: "They said, 'Welcome to hell.' This is hell. You have to spend time in the jungle. Because there is no way, no chance." They feel insecure due to fights, fires or the threat of rape in bathrooms, and they report having to eat inadequate or rotten food or food from the garbage. Particularly, they mention winter and vermin as extreme hardships, as well as the unsafety and lack of humanity they endure:

> There's no humanity here. There's no humanity because during the winter, we're sleeping outside, it rains on us. There's water running under us. Life is so hard. There are mice sleeping on me. There are no lights. (Syrian single man).

Children are particularly affected. Several parents reported that "our kids were scared" (Syrian mother) or

> We were actually afraid because there are a lot of problems. There was also a fire in the camp. The children were scared, they have problems, psychological problems. They're afraid. Sometimes they pee on themselves. (Iraqi mother).

Indeed, how refugees survive this **bare life** becomes clear in many interviews, which reveal – as three refugees put it – an "everyday dying":

> It's better that you die in your country, under the fire of some weapon. But in this country, you're dying every day ... Every day, when you see your children, your life, when you don't have a job, when you don't have money, no diapers, you're dying every day. I'm dying every day here, really. (Kurdish-Iraqi father).

Ten refugees also link their experiences of this inhumanity directly or indirectly to **racism**. For example, a Syrian single man recounts another refugee's encounter:

> He went to the camp manager and said, 'What if my child died? You put us on the mountain, it's a bad place.' And the manager answered, 'It's not our problem. The cockroaches are Greek; you came to their place, they didn't come to yours.' He said it wasn't his problem, that he and the son had gone to the cockroaches' place, not the reverse.

Finally, another profound form of the experience of inhumanity is described as **waithood**, which takes various forms in refugee accounts, including waithood to leave the camp, waithood for food, waithood to see a doctor etc. The most burdensome form of waithood, however, is the lengthy periods of not being registered, being unable to apply for asylum, waiting for an answer, receiving a rejection and retrying, not obtaining a passport etc., all of which intensified during COVID. Particularly, single men are affected by thoughts of suicide linked to this waithood; thus, they are particularly vulnerable in a context where they do not meet the European criteria for vulnerability. One Afghan single man recounted:

> The asylum process. I know about two people who tried to kill themselves. They tried to kill themselves during the lockdown. … I was getting a lot of medicine, paracetamol, ibuprofen. I took a lot of them. I tried to do something to die. … And I'm still waiting. … I'm always inside the tent. I don't go around with anyone. I just go to the sea. I stay in my tent because I'm waiting to receive the call from the asylum office. ... I feel that I'm not OK. … I need to move; my body needs to move.

5.2 Experiences of the EU as humanitarian compassion and as liberal, rules-based

The experience of the EU as humanitarian compassion appears rarely in the interviews, and the perception of the EU as liberal and rules-based is almost non-existent. Out of 30 interviewees, two women reported how experiences of compassion have been dominant since they arrived in Greece. An older stateless mother from the Gulf countries highlights, "To be clear and to be honest, I was a person without a light, without a future. Now I have a light, now my life is really different." A young single mother from Central Africa noted that the "Greeks took care of me". There are another five interviewees who report some positive experiences (better situation once they got a container, medical assistance, helpful Greek border police, good experience considering capacities in Greece and feeling safe), mixed with negative ones.

As for the EU as liberal and rules-based, this articulation appears in only two interviews. A young adult man who converted to Christianity upon arrival points out, "I have freedom here; I feel free and safe." A Kurdish-Iraqi father perceives the liberal order in Europe as protective against even more outright violence but does not perceive the EU as democratic:

> They will never say, 'We don't like you' because they are scared, maybe of the EU Parliament or the European law. … No, they will fight with you, but not with weapons, with your mind, psychologically. … They use politics to make the refugee leave the country. … Is this democracy? Tell me if this is democracy.

5.3 Re-imagining the EU from the margins

The refugees were not prompted to respond to how they imagined a different EU. However, many of them referenced this on their own during the last, open-ended question ("We have informed you about this research project, which should also work to the benefit of migrants: is there anything you would like to share about how this

project should benefit migrants?"). One common approach is **to narrate their stories** to the European public, to have their voices heard, including through interviews, even though refugees also express doubts about the potential impact of these efforts. As an Afghan single man pointed out:

> Spread our voices. People outside need to know what's happening in Greece. This is what I want. That our message is spread, to other people, about what happens in Greece. I hope that this message reaches everyone, so they will know what's happening here in Greece.

Some refugees advocate for **shared humanity and integration**. This vision differs from humanitarianism as it does not view refugees merely as victims needing help but recognises their agency. For example, a Congolese single man suggests: "We need to learn how to love each other. Because the world is one, and we have to try to organise this world. Don't fight. Don't allow people to live in bad situations." A Pakistani father proposed considering the potential of refugees to contribute to societies:

> If they legalise the illegal people here, it will be in favour of the Greek society and also in favour of a particular person like me or other refugees. They will be able to work legally. They will be able to pay taxes. It will be helpful for the society, as well as for them … a win-win situation.

Finally, refugees suggest addressing **the causes of migration**. A Syrian single man points out: "If we want to talk about helping migrants, maybe what we can do is, well, help them to not leave their countries and not to help them when they are in Europe. We should help migrants in their own countries." This is interpreted somewhat differently by a single man from Congo, who provides more of a postcolonial reading:

> Many countries survive because of Africa; many things are not here but in Africa. They are getting from us. … It's because some people come to create problems. And that's why we leave our country to come here. […] Africa is gonna be a very good continent. Because we have everything. We can. But they […] don't want us to be together.

6. Conclusion

This research has proposed a contrapuntal reading of how the contestation of what it means to be European is evolving in the EU with a specific case study, the "migration crisis" in the Aegean borderland in 2020. The EU as deterrence appears as a dominant articulation by EU policymakers, even though it is audibly contested by the articulation of the EU as liberal and rules-based by EUCSOs. The contrapuntal analysis of this research has been a powerful methodological approach as it has demonstrated how the EU as deterrence is temporarily stabilised in European policies, which can be seen in the bodily lived experiences of the refugees. In these experiences, hardly any accounts (2 out of 30) depict the existence of a liberal, rules-based EU, while the experience of the EU as deterrence dominates all interviews. It manifests in the form of state violence, inhumanity, bare life, waithood and racism. Thus, through

its particular contrapuntal analysis, this article corroborates the findings of Fassi, Ceccorulli and Lucarelli (2023), who "detect a general trend towards re-bordering, meaning processes through which the control of borders is enhanced, and their exclusionary meaning", "a limes between those who access certain rights and those who do not, increased". They also point out that "EU policies have been leaning towards one specific understanding of liberalism to the detriment of the others, which poses significant challenges to the EU's credentials as a pillar of the Liberal Word Order—and of its international protection regime" (Fassi, Ceccorulli, and Lucarelli 2023). Similarly, this research has also shown, while the identification of the EU with deterrence is temporarily stabilised in policies, identification with the EU as liberal and rules-based remains a powerful contestant.

The EU as deterrence and as liberal and rules-based has been bundled together by policymakers and EUCSOs with the EU as humanitarian compassion but in diverse articulations. Policymakers employ performative humanitarian compassion while EUCSOs articulate it as enacted humanitarian compassion. The experience of the EU as humanitarian compassion by refugees is somewhat more frequent than the EU as a liberal, rules-based entity. The refugees also articulated an alternative identification, namely of the EU as part of a shared humanity, which contests both performative and enacted humanitarian compassion. While in the latter they are on the receiving end of protection and aid, in shared humanity, refugees instead have agency as they raise their voices for their rights and are framed as part of a win-win situation in terms of societal and labour integration in Europe. The concept is also applied internationally, where the refugees wish to see more thought going into the root causes of migration, including from a postcolonial perspective.

As these conclusions highlight, a contrapuntal approach is a useful methodological tool when studying contested processes of identity formation, as it helps us to understand and reflect on EU identity formation from the perspective of its effects, as well as resistance against it. In this dimension, this article also speaks to the larger emerging literature on practices of contestation of the EU (Sarto and Tholens 2020). In other words, it provides for the study of emerging alternatives in a particular time and space and, thus, for an approach that is more comprehensive when studying the "very processes of identification in historically specific, contingent relations" (Bucher and Jasper 2017, 408). More theoretical thought, however, still needs to go into how a contrapuntal reading can be more densely theoretically incorporated into such an approach.

References

120 Organizations (2020). "EU-Greece-Turkey: 'Protect Our Laws and Humanity!' - Open Letter by 120 Organizations." https://www.statewatch.org/observatories/immigration-and-asylum-in-europe/2020/3-9-march-2020/eu-greece-turkey-protect-our-laws-and-humanity-open-letter-by-120-organizations/ (August 28, 2023).

Acharya Amitav (2017). "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order." *Ethics & International Affairs*. https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/multiplex-world-order/ (November 13, 2020).

Ashley Rick (1987). "Foreign Policy as Political Performance." *International Studies Notes,* 13(2), 51–54.

Bleiker Roland, Campbell David , Hutchison Emma, Nicholson Xzarina (2013). "The Visual Dehumanisation of Refugees." *Australian Journal of Political Science,* 48(4), 398–416.

Borrell Josep (2020). "Embracing Europe's Power | by Josep Borrell." *Project Syndicate*. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/embracing-europe-s-power-by-josep-borrell-2020-02 (February 14, 2023).

Brambilla Chiara (2015). "Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept." *Geopolitics,* 20(1), 14–34.

Bucher Bernd, Jasper Ursula (2017). "Revisiting 'Identity' in International Relations: From Identity as Substance to Identifications in Action." *European Journal of International Relations,* 23(2), 391–415.

Campbell David (1998). *Writing Security*. Revised edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Christides Giorgios, Lüdke Steffen (2022). "Frontex Scandal: Classified Report Reveals Full Extent of Cover-Up." *Der Spiegel*. https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/frontex-scandal-classified-report-reveals-full-extent-of-cover-up-a-cd749d04-689d-4407-8939-9e1b-f55175fd (August 28, 2023).

Cusumano Eugenio (2017). "Emptying the Sea with a Spoon? Non-Governmental Providers of Migrants Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean." *Marine Policy* ,75, 91–98.

D'Amato Silvia, Lucarelli Sonia (2019). "Talking Migration: Narratives of Migration and Justice Claims in the European Migration System of Governance." *The International Spectator,* 54(3), 1–17.

Del Sarto Raffaella (2021). *Borderlands: Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Del Sarto Raffaella, Tholens Simone (2020). *Resisting Europe: Practices of Contestation in the Mediterranean Middle East*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Dijstelbloem Huub, van der Veer Lieke (2021). "The Multiple Movements of the Humanitarian Border: The Portable Provision of Care and Control at the Aegean Islands." *Journal of Borderlands Studies,* 36(3), 425–42.

Duchêne Francois (1973). "The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence." In *A Nation Writ Large?*, Kohnstamm Max and Wolfgang Hager (eds.) London: Macmillan, 1–21.

Epstein Charlotte (2011). "Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in

International Politics." *European Journal of International Relations,* 17(2), 327–50.

European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2021). "Reception, Detention and Restriction of Movement at EU External Borders." https://eu.boell.org/en/ECRE2021 (August 28, 2023).

Fassi Enrico, Michela Ceccorulli, and Sonia Lucarelli (2023). "An Illiberal Power? EU Bordering Practices and the Liberal International Order." *International Affairs,* 99(6), 2261–79.

Fontana Iole (2022). "The Human (in)Security Trap: How European Border(Ing) Practices Condemn Migrants to Vulnerability." *International Politics,* 59(3), 465–84.

Glencross Andrew (2021). "The EU and the Temptation to Become a Civilizational State." *European Foreign Affairs Review,* 26(2). https://kluwerlawonline.com/api/Product/CitationPDFURL?file=Journals\EERR\EERR2021022.pdf (August 28, 2023).

Henley Jon (2023). "How Europe's Far Right Is Marching Steadily into the Mainstream." *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/30/far-right-on-the-march-europe-growing-taste-for-control-and-order (August 28, 2023).

Huber Daniela (2023). "Syrian Refugees' Trajectories: From Civil War through Insecure Livelihoods in Transit/Host Contexts to Fortified European Borders." In *Moving Towards Europe*, eds. Asli Selin Okyay, Luca Barana, and Colleen Elizabeth Boland. , 91–116. https://www.peterlang.com/document/1321490 (December 18, 2023).

Huysmans Jef (2000). "The European Union and the Securitization of Migration." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies,* 38(5), 751–77.

Innico Simone (2021). "Enacting Statehood in Places of Exception: The Structural Effect of Statehood on Greek Migration Management." *Ethnopolitics,* 20(3), 362–83.

Jepperson Ronald L., Alex Wendt, and Katzenstein Peter J. (1996). "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security." In *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein. Columbia University Press, 560 Pages.

Karadağ Sibel (2019). "Extraterritoriality of European Borders to Turkey: An Implementation Perspective of Counteractive Strategies." *Comparative Migration Studies,* 7(1), 12.

Kingsley Patrick, and Karam Shoumali (2020). "Taking Hard Line, Greece Turns Back Migrants by Abandoning Them at Sea." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/world/europe/greece-migrants-abandoning-sea.html (August 28, 2023).

Koros Dimitris (2021). "The Normalization of Pushbacks in Greece: Biopolitics and Racist State Crime." *State Crime Journal,* 10(2), 238–56.

Kundnani Hans (2021). "What Does It Mean to Be 'pro-European' Today?" *The New Statesman*. https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2021/02/what-does-it-mean-be-pro-european-today (November 25, 2021).

Kundnani Hans (2023a). "A Far-Right EU?" *International Politics and Society*. https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/a-far-right-eu-6854/?dicbo=v4-wGr9nOm-1078272479 (August 28, 2023).

Kundnani Hans (2023b). "Europe's Geopolitical Confusion." *Internationale Politik Quarterly*. https://ip-quarterly.com/en/europes-geopolitical-confusion (August 28, 2023).

von der Leyen Ursula (2020). "President von Der Leyen at the Press Conference in Greece." *European Commission - European Commission*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_380 (March 23, 2021).

von der Leyen Ursula (2023). "Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on One Year of Russia's Invasion and War of Aggression against Ukraine." https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-european-parliament-plenary-one-year-russias-invasion-and-war-2023-02-15_en (May 30, 2023).

Manners Ian (2002). "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies,* 40(2), 235–58.

Maritato Chiara (2021). "Claiming for Moral Superiority While Bargaining with Mobility: Turkey-EU Migration Diplomacy in the Post-2016 Euro-Mediterranean Space." *De Europa,* 4(1), 89–105.

Maull Hanns W. (1989). "Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers." *Foreign Affairs,* 69, 91.

Mitsotakis Kyriakos (2020). "Statements by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Kastanies, Evros, Following His Visit with the Heads of the EU Institutions at the Greek-Turkish Border." https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2020/03/03/23458 (August 28, 2023).

Mitsotakis Kyriakos (2021). "Greece's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis Had a Fiery Exchange with a Dutch Journalist." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gni27cjFj2o (August 30, 2023).

Mitzen Jennifer (2006). "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma." *European Journal of International Relations,* 12(3), 341–70. doi:10.1177/1354066106067346.

Okyay Asli Selin, Daniela Huber, Luca Barana, and Colleen Boland (2021). "Qualitative study of drivers and trajectories of mixed migration towards the EU." https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/qualitative-study-drivers-and-trajectories-mixed-migration-towards-eu (August 28, 2023).

Pallister-Wilkins Polly (2017). "Humanitarian Rescue/Sovereign Capture and the Policing of Possible Responses to Violent Borders." *Global Policy,* 8(S1), 19–24.

Pallister-Wilkins Polly (2020). "Hotspots and the Geographies of Humanitarianism." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space,* 38(6), 991–1008.

Panebianco Stefania (2022). "Human Security at the Mediterranean Borders: Humanitarian Discourse in the EU Periphery." *International Politics,* 59(3), 428–48.

Panebianco Stefania, and Benjamin Tallis (2022). "Special Issue on 'Shifting Borders of European (In)Securities: Human Security, Border (In)Security and Mobility in Security.'" *International Politics,* 59(3), 399–409.

Rosina Matilde (2019). "Globalisation and Irregular Migration: Does Deterrence Work?" In *The Dark Side of Globalisation*, International Political Economy Series, eds. Leila Simona Talani and Roberto Roccu. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 85–120.

Said Edward W (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Salih Ruba (2017). "Bodies That Walk, Bodies That Talk, Bodies That Love: Palestinian Women Refugees, Affectivity, and the Politics of the Ordinary." *Antipod,e* 49(3), 742–60.

Schinas Margaritis (2020). "Statement by Vice-President Margaritis Schinas on the Situation at the Greek-Turkish Border." *PubAffairs Bruxelles*. https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-institution-news/statement-by-vice-president-margaritis-schinas-on-the-situation-at-the-greek-turkish-border/ (August 28, 2023).

Statewatch (2021). "Greece: The New Hotspots and the Prevention of 'Primary Flows': A Human Rights Disaster." https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2021/greece-the-new-hotspots-and-the-prevention-of-primary-flows-a-human-rights-disaster/ (August 28, 2023).

Stevis-Gridneff Matina, Sarah Kerr, Kessie Bracken, and Nimet Kirac (2023). "Greece Says It Doesn't Ditch Migrants at Sea. It Was Caught in the Act." https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/19/world/europe/greece-migrants-abandoned.html (January 26, 2024).

Stevis-Gridneff Matina, Haley Willis, Sarah Almukhtar, and Malachy Brown (2020). "'We Are Like Animals': Inside Greece's Secret Site for Migrants." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/world/europe/greece-migrants-secret-site.html (August 28, 2023).

Stierl Maurice (2016). "A Sea of Struggle – Activist Border Interventions in the Mediterranean Sea." *Citizenship Studies,* 20(5), 561–78.

Stierl Maurice (2018). "A Fleet of Mediterranean Border Humanitarians." *Antipode,* 50(3), 704–24.

Türkeş-Kiliç Selin (2023). "'I Thank Greece for Being Our European Shield': Von Der Leyen Commission's Spatial Imaginations During the Turkish-Greek Border Crisis in March 2020." *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 20(77): 109–25.

Vaughan-Williams Noel Parker, Nick (ed.) (2016). *Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the "Lines in the Sand" Agenda*. London: Routledge.

Wolff Sarah, David Gazsi, Daniela Huber, and Nora Fisher-Onar (2022). "How to Reflexively Decentre EU Foreign Policy: Dissonance and Contrapuntal Reconstruction in Migration, Religious and Neighbourhood Governance." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies,* 60(6), 1611–28.

Zaragoza-Cristiani Jonathan (2017). "Containing the Refugee Crisis: How the EU Turned the Balkans and Turkey into an EU Borderland." *The International Spectator,* 52(4), 59–75.