

# Refugee Flows and Terrorism in the European Union:

## Securitization through Association

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### Abstract

This article contributes to the debates on the securitization of asylum and migration in Europe by focusing on the securitization of asylum-seekers through their association with terrorism during the 'refugee crisis', which coincided with a 'terrorism crisis', in 2015-2016. Theoretically, it argues that, whilst the intrinsic characteristics of some issues mean that they are unlikely to be directly securitized, they may be indirectly securitized through their association with another issue that has come to be widely accepted as a security threat, such as terrorism or a pandemic. Empirically, the article shows how asylum-seekers, who had not been securitized in Europe in the aftermath of 9/11, became socially constructed as a security threat indirectly through their association with terrorism in 2015-2016. This association mainly took place through the deployment of specific practices. Recent events suggest that the securitization of asylum-seekers in the EU has had enduring effects.

**Keywords:** securitization; European Union; refugees; asylum-seekers; counter-terrorism; hotspot

## **Introduction**

Following the swift reconquest of Afghanistan by the Taliban in the summer 2021, the Ministers of Home Affairs of the European Union (EU) Member States met on 31 August in order to discuss 'potential implications in the areas of international protection, migration and security' (Council of the European Union, 2021: 1). In their statement at the end of the meeting, the ministers emphasised their intention to support third countries, including their asylum capacity, with a view to ensuring that those in need of international protection receive it in their region of origin. They also highlighted that '[the] EU and its Member States will do their utmost to ensure that the situation in Afghanistan does not lead to new security threats for EU citizens' and underlined that '[the] timely performance of security checks of persons being evacuated from Afghanistan remains crucial' (Council of the European Union, 2021: 1).

This strongly-worded statement was echoed by declarations made by some European leaders in the margins of the Council meeting. Interior Minister Ales Hojs of Slovenia, which held the EU's rotating presidency at the time, declared that European leaders were 'afraid this situation could again result in terrorist attacks on EU soil' (Baczynska, 2021). For his part, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer argued against identifying a target number of refugees from Afghanistan to be resettled in the EU since 'numbers obviously trigger a pull-effect and we don't want that' (Boffey, 2021). These declarations and the statement of the Council on the situation in Afghanistan were met with outrage

from various non-governmental organisations just as violence erupted in Afghanistan. For instance, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (2021) criticised the Council for what it described as its ‘anti-refugee tropes’ and its ‘amateurish “security” talk’, before calling for asylum to be given in Europe to those in need.

These debates show that the asylum-seekers fleeing from Afghanistan in 2021 have largely been seen as a security threat to the EU and its Member States. That is rather puzzling, as asylum-seekers have traditionally be seen as the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of violence. It is true that some scholars have highlighted how in some cases asylum-seekers and refugees have turned out to constitute a threat to their country of origin or their guest country (Stedman and Tanner, 2003). However, this phenomenon has generally occurred in non-industrialised countries where state authority may have been challenged. The case studies examined in that strand of academic literature do not tend to concern Europe. Moreover, there have traditionally been norms that require protection to be granted to those in need and that have been legally enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, 2021).

Consequently, this article seeks to examine how asylum-seekers have come to be treated as security threats in the EU – or, to use the term coined by the so-called ‘Copenhagen School’ of security studies – ‘securitized’. This article argues that asylum-

seekers have become socially constructed as security threats in the EU through their association with terrorism during the 'refugee crisis' in Europe of 2015-2016, which coincided with a 'terrorism crisis'. It develops this argument by engaging with the debates on securitization and developing the novel idea of 'securitization through association'. Methodologically, the article uses documentary analysis and draws upon a range of EU official documents and media reports concerning both asylum cooperation and counter-terrorism cooperation in the EU. For its purpose, it is structured into four sections. First, it discusses the growing literature on the securitization of asylum and migration in the EU and highlights that it has not considered the possibility that asylum-seekers could be indirectly securitized through their association with an issue that has become widely seen as a security threat. This is important because the intrinsic characteristics of asylum-seekers make them unlikely to be directly securitized. However, it does not mean that they could not be indirectly securitized. Second, it presents the securitization framework and develops the novel idea of 'securitization through association'. Third, it applies this approach to the empirical case of the securitization of asylum-seekers through their association with terrorists in the EU, contrasting the impact of 9/11 with that of the 'terrorist crisis' of 2015-2016. The final section offer concluding remarks.

### **The securitization of asylum and migration in the EU**

In the last two decades, there has been a substantial amount of academic literature focusing on the securitization of asylum and migration in the EU, that is, how asylum and migration have been socially constructed, or framed, as security issues. The

interest in this topic has notably been fuelled by the growing role of the EU in asylum and migration matters (Geddes, 2008; Geddes et al., 2020; Léonard and Kaunert, 2019). Notwithstanding few exceptions (see Boswell, 2007; Neal, 2009), most scholars have argued that asylum and migration have been successfully securitized in the EU (Bigo, 1998, 2002; Huysmans, 2000, 2006; Guild, 2003; Lazaridis, 2011; Chebel d'Appollonia, 2012; Bello, 2017). Some scholarly works have examined the modalities of this securitization process. They have notably considered the role of a range of actors in the securitization of asylum and migration in various countries or at the EU level, including security agencies, political leaders and the media (e.g. Huysmans, 2000, 2006; Ceyhan and Tsoukala, 2002; Karyotis, 2012; Bourbeau, 2011; Tsoukala, 2011). Others have rather focused on critically examining the consequences of securitizing asylum-seekers and migrants in Europe and called for a fundamental rethinking of the ways in which asylum and migration are handled (e.g. Huysmans, 1995; van Munster, 2009; Squire, 2009; Guild, 2009; Bello, 2017).

However, the idea that asylum-seekers and migrants have been successfully securitized in Europe seems somewhat counter-intuitive, particularly in the case of asylum-seekers. This is because, as already argued by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998: 31-33) - who are at the heart of the Copenhagen School -, an attempt at securitizing an issue – which they call a 'securitizing move' – is more likely to succeed under certain conditions, which notably include the 'nature of the threat'. In other words, the very characteristics of a phenomenon have a significant bearing on the likelihood that it can be successfully presented as a security threat. From that viewpoint, asylum-

seekers – who are generally seen as victims fleeing from the threat of violence or persecution – appear to be unlikely candidates for a successful social construction as a security threat. One can argue that it may be challenging to successfully place a security framing on an issue that, traditionally, has been framed as a humanitarian issue.

Moreover, scholars have generally tended to bundle asylum and migration together when making the claim that asylum and migration have been securitized in Europe. Although there is a rich body of legal literature that carefully distinguishes the EU's asylum policy from its migration one, this distinction has not always been reflected in the works examining migration (or mobility) and security. However, asylum and migration are different issues with varied intrinsic characteristics and they are governed by contrasting international regimes. Asylum-seekers and migrants are different categories of persons, who may be perceived differently. This is important because the existence and nature of international rules, as well as different perceptions in society, are likely to influence with which ease and how each of these issues can be securitized.

However, one can conceive that it might be possible for an issue that cannot easily be securitized directly because of its intrinsic characteristics to be securitized *indirectly* through its association with another issue that has become widely accepted as a security issue. Such an indirect securitization of asylum and migration in Europe has not been considered in the academic literature to date. The scholarship reviewed in this

section only considers instances of direct securitization, although this remains implicit. In order to further develop this argument, the article now turns to the theoretical debates on securitization.

### **Securitization processes and securitization through association**

At the heart of the debates on securitization is the idea that security issues come into being through their social construction by a 'securitizing actor', rather than existing 'out there' objectively. In its initial formulation by the so-called 'Copenhagen School', this process of securitization has a linguistic character, as security is defined as a 'speech act' (Buzan et al., 1998: 26; Wæver, 1995: 54-55). A securitizing actor discursively presents a given issue as posing an existential threat to the survival of a 'referent object', such as a state or a nation, and claims the right to use extraordinary measures to address it. If the audience of the speech act accepts this 'securitizing move', then securitization has been successful. In reaction to the Copenhagen School's writings, some scholars – sometimes presented as the so-called 'Paris School' – have argued that issues can also be securitized through practices. As argued by Bigo (2000: 194), '[i]t is possible to securitise certain problems without speech or discourse and the military and the police have known that for a long time. The practical work, discipline and expertise are as important as all forms of discourse'. Writing about the specific issue of the securitization of migration, he has observed that it partially stems 'from a range of administrative practices such as population profiling, risk assessment, statistical calculation, category creation, proactive preparation, and what may be termed a specific habitus of the "security professional" with its ethos of secrecy and concern for

the management of fear or unease' (Bigo, 2002: 65-66). In line with other pieces of research (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019; Bourbeau, 2014), this article takes the view that it is beneficial for any analysis of securitization to consider both discourses and practices of securitization. Both approaches can be reconciled, as differences between them should not be over-stated (Bourbeau, 2014). Moreover, such a strategy can highlight instances where concrete practices may somewhat differ from public pronouncements.

Whatever the approach to studying securitization, an important issue that has overall been neglected in the debates about securitization is that of the nature and the characteristics of issues that are successfully securitized. This is related to the broader problem of the under-theorisation of the role of the context in securitization (McDonald, 2008). Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (1998) only briefly address the matter of the nature of the threat when they note that a securitizing move is more likely to be successful when 'one can conjure a security threat if certain objects can be referred to that are generally held to be threatening – be they tanks, hostile sentiments, or polluted waters' (Buzan et al., 1998: 33). In their opinion, those are not sufficient in themselves, but are 'facilitating conditions' of securitization (Buzan et al., 1998: 33). In other words, the intrinsic characteristics, including the material characteristics, of an issue influence the likelihood that it can be successfully securitized. Therefore, there are some issues that have intrinsic characteristics that make it unlikely that they could be successfully securitized.



However, and this is a novel argument put forward by this article, one can conceive that a specific issue that may be difficult to directly securitize could be *indirectly* securitized by linking it to another issue that is widely considered a security threat, having been itself previously successfully securitized. This can be referred to as 'securitization through association'. From that perspective, some issues may have intrinsic characteristics or may have been traditionally framed in a certain way that make their direct presentation as a security threat unlikely to be accepted by the audience. However, under certain circumstances, they may be convincingly linked to another issue that has been successfully securitized. They then become successfully securitized themselves through association.

Notwithstanding the importance of the characteristics of issues that a securitizing actor may attempt to securitize, it is important to emphasise that any securitizing move also needs to be considered in its broader context. A securitizing move may be more successful at a specific historical conjuncture than at other times. An audience is more likely to be convinced by a securitizing move when it feels more vulnerable to a specific threat (Balzacq, 2005: 182-183). From that perspective, the possibility for a securitizing actor to point at historical instances of a threat or its deployment in another country, for example, is likely to increase the probability that a securitizing move will be successful. A threat that has already materialised is arguably more 'real' than a purely hypothetical one, making an actor attempting to securitize a specific issue more convincing and credible.

## **Securitizing asylum-seekers in the EU through their association with terrorism?**

Applying these ideas to the empirical focus of this article, one can argue that, in general, it appears rather challenging to successfully securitize asylum-seekers. Those are generally depicted as victims of violence, who flee from their home in haste with very few, if any, of their belongings. For example, the Hillsong Church in the UK, which has been fundraising for asylum-seekers, describes them as such: '[those] arriving to the UK as asylum seekers often arrive with just clothes on their backs' (Hillsong Church UK, 2021). Such characteristics of vulnerability and destituteness seem to make asylum-seekers unlikely to be successfully portrayed as security threats<sup>1</sup>. There are also norms derived from cultural and religious traditions which dictate that protection should be given to those who need it. These norms have found their legal expression in the 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Those key legal documents define the term 'refugee' and outline the rights of refugees, as well as the legal obligations of States to protect them (Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, 2021). An important legal principle, which has become customary international law, is that of 'non-refoulement', which means that an asylum-seeker should never be returned to a country where they could face serious threats to their freedom or their life (ICRC, 2018). Thus, traditionally, asylum-seekers have been framed as persons who have rights and are deserving of international protection. Again, this makes them unlikely candidates for a convincing and successful social construction as security threats by a securitizing actor.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to acknowledge that some observers may have seen these characteristics as indicating that asylum-seekers could actually be more prone to radicalisation, thereby becoming security threats, especially to their host country.

### ***The impact of 9/11***

Some observers have argued that the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 had a significant impact on how asylum-seekers, together with migrants, were perceived and treated in Europe (Guild, 2003; Colman, 2006). In line with the analytical framework developed earlier, one can therefore ask whether asylum-seekers were associated with terrorists, thereby being indirectly securitized, at that point. Terrorism had indeed become collectively securitized in the EU as a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Kaunert and Léonard, 2019). Overall, the answer to this question is negative.

When one examines the development of EU cooperation on asylum, which has been centred on the development of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), one cannot find any evidence that policy developments have been significantly influenced by a linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorists. In line with the Treaty of Amsterdam, which had entered into force in 1999, and the so-called 'Tampere Programme' – a work programme on Justice and Home Affairs that had been agreed in October 1999 -, the EU Member States adopted a series of legal instruments dealing with various aspects of the asylum process, namely criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for considering an asylum application, as well as minimum standards regarding the criteria for qualifying for international protection, the procedures governing the asylum process, and the reception conditions for asylum-seekers. The amount of legislative outputs achieved during the first phase of the development of the CEAS was

impressive, as the following instruments were adopted: the Eurodac Regulation (2000), the Temporary Protection Directive (2001), the Dublin II Regulation (2003), the Reception Conditions Directive (2003), the Qualification Directive (2004) and the Asylum Procedures Directive (2005). Although some observers may have wished for the adoption of higher minimum standards or truly common standards without any exceptions on these various aspects of the asylum process, EU cooperation actually strengthened asylum standards across the EU overall (Ferguson Sidorenko, 2007; Storey, 2008), and was certainly not driven by security concerns (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that there were never any statements made by European political leaders linking asylum and terrorism in the years following 9/11 (see Schlentz, 2010). It is also true that there were some mentions of asylum-seekers in the EU's counter-terrorism measures adopted as a result of these terrorist attacks. For example, the Council Common Position on combating terrorism (2001/930/CFSP) that was adopted in December 2001 refers to the importance of ensuring before granting refugee status that 'the asylum-seeker has not planned, facilitated or participated in the commission of terrorist acts' (Article 16) and that 'refugee status is not abused by the perpetrators, organisers or facilitators of terrorist acts' (Article 17). Thus, those are not new obligations placed on EU Member States as a result of 9/11, but rather a reminder of the importance of applying the exclusion clauses originally introduced by the 1951 Convention (see Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, 2021).

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that, on occasions, concerns over terrorism – amongst various considerations - have been taken into account when debating and developing EU asylum policy measures. Two examples that have often been given by those arguing that asylum-seekers have been largely viewed as terrorists in the aftermath of 9/11 are a Working Document of the European Commission on ‘the relationship between safeguarding internal security and complying with international protection obligations and instruments’ and the legislation adopted by the EU regarding qualification for international protection. The former was published in December 2001, following a request by the EU Member States on 20 September 2001. The document highlights that ‘bona fide refugees and asylum seekers should not become victims of the recent events’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2001: 6). It also emphasises that ‘the Commission fully endorses the line taken and expressed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that, rather than through major changes to the refugee protection regime, a scrupulous application of the exceptions to refugee protection available under current law, is the appropriate approach’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2001: 6). Thus, the European Commission did not construct a strong link between asylum-seekers and terrorists. In contrast, it argued that using the existing legal mechanisms (which are based on the exclusion clauses enumerated in Article 1F of the 1951 Convention) for excluding from international protection those who do not deserve it would be sufficient for protecting asylum channels from potential abuse in the EU. The mere fact of considering the relationship between international protection obligations and internal security cannot be seen as evidence that asylum-seekers are largely viewed as terrorists. One can actually

argue that it demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that one's international obligations are entirely fulfilled.

As for the legislation adopted by the EU regarding qualification for international protection, it has been criticised by scholars such as Guild and Garlick (2010) for expanding the scope of the exclusion clauses in EU legislation in comparison with the 1951 Convention. Although they make some valid points, the overall thrust of their argument is limited by their own observation that, in its first relevant judgement, the Court of Justice of the EU 'set out distinct limits on the scope for States to apply exclusion provisions, which are based on Refugee Convention principles, in new and wide-ranging ways' (Guild and Garlick, 2010: 80). Again, the inclusion of exclusion clauses in the EU asylum legislation does not constitute sufficient evidence that a strong link between asylum-seekers and terrorists has been constructed in the aftermath of 9/11. Exclusion clauses were already included in the 1951 Convention. Moreover, the role of the Court of Justice in the EU asylum policy area has contributed to ensuring that these exclusion clauses are interpreted in a narrow way that benefits asylum-seekers.

Therefore, one can conclude that, contrary to what some observers suggested in the wake of 9/11 (Guild, 2003; Colman, 2006), no significant link was socially constructed between asylum and terrorism that could have led to the indirect securitization of asylum-seekers through their association with terrorism in the EU. Although some terrorism concerns may have been part of the debates on EU asylum cooperation, there

is no evidence that there was a widespread framing of asylum-seekers as potential terrorists that would have significantly shaped the development of the EU's asylum policy. Arguably, the fact that asylum-seekers were not mainly seen as potential terrorists and thereby indirectly securitized in the EU after 9/11 can also be explained - at least partially - by the impossibility of pointing at an association between asylum-seekers and terrorists in the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2011. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks had entered the US on a visitor or student visa; none of them was an asylum-seeker (Eldridge et al., 2004). Consequently, linkages between asylum-seekers and terrorism - if they had been constructed in Europe at that time - would have been hypothetical, rather than strengthened by references to actual events.

The lack of an established linkage between asylum and terrorism (and thereby security indirectly) is confirmed by the findings of the scholars who have analysed the development of the EU asylum policy from a public policy angle. Those have found that, in the early stages of the development of the CEAS, the main concern for many Member States – particularly those most experienced in dealing with asylum - in the protracted negotiations of the EU asylum measures tended to be *not* terrorism or security, but the importance of protecting their national measures and avoiding changes to their own policies (Hailbronner, 2009; Zaun, 2017).

### ***The impact of the 2015-2016 'refugee crisis'***

The year 2015 saw asylum and migration matters reach the top of the political agenda in the EU. This resulted from the arrival of large flows of asylum-seekers and migrants, especially in Greece and Italy. Those were caused to a significant extent by the war in Syria. For instance, in less than five days in August 2015, Greece received more than 40,000 people who had crossed by sea from Turkey (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2015: 2). Large numbers of migrants and asylum-seekers continued to make their way from Turkey to Europe by sea or by land in the following months. This was mainly due to the advances of Daesh in Syria, combined with a decrease in the controls of the flows of migrants and asylum-seekers by the Turkish authorities (Léonard and Kaunert, 2021). Overall, more than one million asylum-seekers and migrants entered the EU in the space of a few months, which rapidly came to be seen as a 'refugee crisis' (or 'migration crisis') (Trauner, 2016).

Around the same time, EU Member States were also hit by several terrorist attacks. Although some of them only involved one 'lone wolf terrorist' and were on a small scale, others were much larger in scope, both in terms of perpetrators and victims. In particular, on the night of Friday 13 November 2015, a group of suicide-bombers and gunmen targeted a major stadium, a concert hall, as well as several restaurants and bars in Paris, which resulted in the death of 130 people (BBC News, 2015). The same terrorist cell, which was connected to Daesh, was subsequently involved in terrorist attacks in Brussels in March 2016 (Paravicini, 2017). The significant increase in the numbers of terrorist attacks and of victims led to a widespread perception of a 'terrorism crisis' in Europe.



Thus, not only did both crises occur at the same time, but they were also interacting. At the same time as the flows of asylum-seekers and migrants were caused by the activities of Daesh in the Middle East to a significant extent, some of the perpetrators – who were more or less closely linked to Daesh – were people who had entered Europe as part of the large flows of asylum-seekers and migrants mentioned earlier. In other words, there was what some analysts described as a ‘terrorist infiltration’ of these flows of migrants and asylum-seekers (Mullins, 2019). The issue of the exact scale of the problem was a matter of intense debates, to which Daesh also contributed. A self-appointed Daesh operative notably indicated in an interview in January 2015 that 4,000 jihadist fighters had already been sent to Europe posing as migrants and asylum-seekers (Mullins, 2019: 5-6). Unsurprisingly, the issue was seized by populist and far-right parties, although they did not only target asylum-seekers, but also migrants more broadly. For instance, Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán branded the European refugee policy the ‘Trojan horse of terrorism’ at the 2017 Malta Congress of the European People’s Party (Brunsden, 2017). This followed his statement made a few days after the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015 that “[of] course it’s not accepted, but the factual point is that all the terrorists are basically migrants’ (Kaminski, 2015). As for Marine Le Pen, the President of the French ‘Rassemblement National’, she declared that ‘[with] the serious terror threat that weighs on us, we have to be able to control who enters to be able to expel those who represent a danger’ (Dearden, 2017).

Other voices in Europe had attempted to break the linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorism. For example, one of the first statements made by the then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker following the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015 was a plea not to mix up refugees from the Middle East and terrorists (Zalan, 2015). Likewise, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasised that '[the] phenomenon of Islamist terrorism, of IS, is not a phenomenon that came to us with the refugees' (Reuters, 2016). This was echoed on the international stage in a report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights, Ben Emmerson, which argued that there was 'little evidence' that refugee flows had been used by terrorists or that asylum-seekers were particularly prone to radicalisation (Dearden, 2016). Thus, discursively, a strong and clear linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorism, which would have indirectly securitized asylum-seekers in Europe, was not established. Different opinions as to the possible link between asylum-seekers and terrorists were expressed.

However, turning now to the issue of practices, it can be argued that, following the terrorist attacks in 2015-2016, various policy measures have been taken by the EU that have treated asylum-seekers as potential terrorists. Some of these measures have aimed to reinforce border controls in general, rather than targeting asylum-seekers in particular. This is because migration flows towards Europe have generally been 'mixed' flows that comprise both (irregular) migrants and asylum-seekers. Nonetheless, by treating any person migrating as a potential terrorist risk, they have notably framed *asylum-seekers* as potential terrorists. Amongst these measures, one can identify the

strengthening of external border controls and of the role of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) in general, as well as the development of the so-called 'hotspot' approach.

First of all, external border controls have been significantly reinforced following the adoption of Regulation (EU) 2016/399 with a view to notably identifying potential terrorists. This has gone hand in hand with a considerable expansion of Frontex, with regard to its staffing, budget and activities (Moreno-Lax, 2017; Bossong, 2019). The new Frontex Regulation, which entered into force in 2016, has made Frontex a significant actor in the EU's counter-terrorism policy (Council of the European Union, 2018). The agency has the competence to process personal data related to suspects of terrorism, which it collects during the operations it coordinates and where it comes into contact with large numbers of migrants and asylum-seekers. Of particular interest is also the growing cooperation that Frontex has developed with Europol. This has led to the signing of a new joint Action Plan in June 2019, which underpins their cooperation for the next few years (Europol, 2019). It notably concerns the structural exchange of information between the two EU agencies with the aim of supporting both border controls and investigations. It is believed that external border controls can be enhanced by information from Europol concerning criminal groups and terrorists, whilst criminal investigations can benefit from information gathered by Frontex during its activities at the EU's external borders. In addition, both agencies have also agreed to cooperate in the field of research and development of new technologies (Europol, 2019), as well as exchanging liaison officers from 2021 onwards (Europol, 2021).

Furthermore, border controls have also been reinforced through the roll-out of Common Risk Indicators (CRIs) for use at the EU's external borders. Those have also contributed to creating a linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorism, as their existence suggests that border guards need to check whether a person arriving at the external border does not represent a terrorist risk. These CRIs are now used by the national border authorities of the EU Member States and of the Schengen Associated countries when conducting checks on individuals. Against the backdrop of concerns relating to the possible return of foreign terrorist fighters to Europe, the European Commission had completed the development of a first set of Common Risk Indicators (CRIs) in collaboration with Interpol, European agencies, the EEAS and national authorities in June 2015. Frontex subsequently developed a handbook in order to operationalise the CRIs (European Commission, 2016: 2). More recently, these CRIs have also been translated into various languages, including Serbian, Croatian, Albanian, Macedonian and Russian, so that they can be used in the Eastern Partnership Region (Frontex, 2018: 8). Finally, there have also been attempts at strengthening border controls through the increasing interoperability of the various Justice and Home Affairs databases that the EU has developed (see Blasi Casagran, 2021). The idea here is that, for example, one database containing the fingerprints of asylum-seekers (i.e. Eurodac) may contain relevant information for police officers investigating crimes should those have been committed by asylum-seekers. Although it is mainly presented as an attempt at closing the 'information gap', interoperability is one of the strongest ways in which linkages can be established between asylum-seekers and terrorism, amongst

other possible linkages, through the suggestion that asylum-seekers are potential terrorists (or criminals, more broadly).

A linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorism has also been suggested by the development of the so-called 'hotspot approach'. The 'hotspot approach' was put forward by the European Commission as part of the European Agenda on Migration, which was published on 13 May 2015 (European Commission, 2015). It was presented by the European Commission as one of the EU's tools designed to help the frontline Member States in the short term against the backdrop of the 'refugee crisis'. The European Agenda on Migration did not directly define the 'hotspot approach', but suggested that it involves collaboration 'on the ground' between the European Asylum Support Office, Frontex, Europol and 'frontline Member States' in order to 'swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants' (European Commission, 2015a: 6; see also European Commission, 2015b). The 'hotspot approach' has been applied at both 'hotspots' and ports of disembarkation through the use of mobile units (European Parliament, 2017: 45). 'Hotspots' were described in the Conclusions of the European Council meeting on 25-26 June 2015 as 'reception and first reception facilities in the frontline Member States' (European Council, 2015: 2). Their main aim appeared to allow for the determination of 'those who need international protection and those who do not' (European Council, 2015: 2). Traditionally, the term 'hotspots' had been used by border guards to refer to sections of borders characterised by large numbers of irregular crossings. In EU circles, 'hotspots' now tend to be understood as the centres where asylum-seekers and migrants are identified, registered and fingerprinted (European

Parliament, 2017: 44) with a view to identifying those who need protection and may be relocated, as well as those who may represent a threat to the EU and its Member States.

In practice, the 'hotspot' approach has been implemented in Greece and Italy from October 2015 onwards. Five hotspots were established in Italy, namely in Messina, Taranto, Pozzallo, Trapani and Lampedusa, whilst five were set up in Greece on the islands of Leros, Kos, Chios, Samos and Lesbos (Danish Refugee Council, 2017). Systematic security checks are conducted in the 'hotspots' with the support of Frontex and Europol. Physical and belongings checks are carried out, alongside checks in various national and international databases, including the Schengen Information System (which contains alerts on various categories of persons and objects) and Interpol's Stolen and Lost Travel Documents database. Should there be indications that there may be grounds for exclusion or that a threat to security or public order exists, then secondary checks of asylum applicants can be conducted, including searches of databases and social media, as well as interviews (European Parliament, 2017, 2018). It is also noteworthy that, beyond the 'hotspots', some EU Member States that had agreed to accept asylum-seekers under the EU's relocation programme - which aimed to support Italy and Greece by redistributing some of the asylum-seekers they had received – have insisted on carrying out their own security checks, in addition to the checks already carried out locally (see European Council for Refugees and Exiles, 2017). This is another indication of the link between asylum-seekers and terrorism that has developed through the deployment of specific practices.

Thus, this section has shown that, in contrast with 9/11, the 'terrorist crisis' in Europe, which coincided and intersected with a 'refugee crisis', led to the establishment of a strong linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorists, thereby indirectly securitizing asylum-seekers in the EU. This can notably be explained by the fact that, contrary to 9/11, some of the terrorists had used the asylum channels to enter the EU. Moreover, the analysis showed that there is merit in considering both discourses and practices of securitization, as the linkage between asylum-seekers and terrorism was stronger in the practices than in the discourse, which was characterised by dissonant voices.

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to contributing to the debates on the securitization of asylum and migration in Europe by focusing on the securitization of asylum-seekers through their association with terrorism during the 'refugee crisis', which coincided with a 'terrorism crisis', in 2015-2016. Although scholarship on the securitization of asylum and migration in the EU has burgeoned in recent years, it has not considered the possibility that asylum-seekers could be indirectly securitized through their association with another issue, which has itself become established as a security threat. This article addresses this gap using the case of the association of asylum-seekers with terrorism. Theoretically, it contributes to the debates on securitization. It shows that, whilst the intrinsic characteristics of some issues mean that they are unlikely to be directly securitized, they may be indirectly securitized through their association with another

issue that has come to be widely accepted as a security threat, such as terrorism or a pandemic. Empirically, the article shows how asylum-seekers, who had not been securitized in Europe in the aftermath of 9/11, became socially constructed as a security threat indirectly through their association with terrorism in 2015-2016. This association mainly took place through the deployment of specific practices. Moreover, this securitization process through association was facilitated by the coincidence of the 'refugee crisis' with a 'terrorism crisis' as EU countries were hit by several terrorist attacks, some of which involved asylum-seekers. Since then, various practices treating asylum-seekers as potential terrorists have been developed, thereby indirectly securitizing asylum-seekers in the EU. Those have included the strengthening of border controls and of Frontex, as well as the development of the 'hotspot' approach. The reactions in Europe to the potential arrival of asylum-seekers from Afghanistan in 2021 suggest that the securitization of asylum-seekers in the EU has had enduring effects.

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