

**The Securitization of Migration in the European Union:  
Frontex and its Evolving Security Practices**

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**Abstract**

*This article investigates the evolving security practices of one of the key actors in the handling of asylum-seekers and migrants at the external borders of the European Union (EU) Member States, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, widely referred to as 'Frontex'. It does so by applying a revised version of the Copenhagen School's securitization framework, which focuses on security practices and is underpinned by an understanding of security as belonging to a continuum. The article compares and contrasts the practices of Frontex in the context of two significant 'migration crises' in the Mediterranean, in 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, respectively. The analysis of the more recent practices of the Agency following the 2015-2016 'migration crisis' shows that this 'crisis' has led to an intensification of the security practices of the Agency. Frontex has moved towards the end point of the continuum, which is characterised by survival, existential threats, and militarisation. This has contributed to a spiralling of the securitization of migration in the EU.*

**Keywords:** Securitization; European Union; refugees; migration; borders; counter-terrorism

## **Introduction**

Asylum and migration matters have increasingly given rise to intense political debates in Europe, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 (Lazaridis and Wadia, 2015). They have been at the heart of several electoral campaigns over the last few years, notably in Germany. This country became the most popular final destination for asylum-seekers and migrants in the context of the 2015-2016 ‘migration crisis’<sup>i</sup>. Initially, Chancellor Angela Merkel appeared to espouse an ‘open-arms policy’. She had argued that Germany was able to absorb large numbers of asylum-seekers and migrants – a position famously summarised by her *‘Wir schaffen das’* statement. However, this phrase would rapidly come to haunt the Chancellor, as her opponents, in particular from the far-right ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD, ‘Alternative for Germany’) party, seized upon this vague idea to criticise the results of the governmental policy.

As migration has captured the political agenda, academics have discussed the link between migration and security, which has sometimes been referred to as the ‘migration-security’ nexus (Faist, 2004; Karyotis, 2003; Miller, 2001; Tirman, 2004; Bourbeau, 2017a). Although some scholars have applied other approaches (see Bourbeau, 2017a), a significant number of researchers have used some of the ideas developed by the Copenhagen School on securitization (Buzan, 1991; Buzan et al., 1998; Waever, 1995; Waever et al., 1993) in order to analyse how migration and security have been linked in various political contexts (Bigo, 1998a, 1998b, 2001a, 2002; Huysmans, 2000, 2006; Guild, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2009; Waever et al., 1993; Karyotis, 2011, 2012; Lazaridis, 2011; Lazaridis and Wadia, 2015; Bourbeau, 2011, 2017b; Chebel d’Appollonia, 2015).

Despite some notable exceptions (Boswell, 2007; Neal, 2009), most scholars have contended that asylum and migration have been successfully securitized in Europe, that is, socially constructed as security issues. In an article published in 2010, Léonard (2010) argued that Frontex, the European agency supporting cooperation amongst EU Member States on the management of external borders (now known as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), had significantly contributed to the securitization of migration through its practices. As ten years have elapsed since the publication of this article and a major ‘migration crisis’ has affected Europe, it is worthwhile re-visiting the issue of the linkage between Frontex and the securitization of migration. It is particularly important because Frontex, which had only started its operations in earnest in 2006, has significantly evolved since then. Also, as time has passed, it is now possible to gain a better appreciation of the activities of Frontex in a historical perspective.

In order to do so, this article draws upon a revised version of the Copenhagen School’s securitization framework. The following section presents this amended version of the securitization framework, which highlights the importance of securitizing practices and is underpinned by a conceptualisation of security as being located on a continuum. It is followed by an analysis of the evolution of the practices of Frontex. The article contrasts the practices of the Agency when faced with two different major ‘migration crises’ in 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, respectively. An analysis of the more recent practices of the Agency, during the 2015-2016 ‘migration crisis’, shows that this ‘crisis’ has led to an intensification of the security practices of the Agency. This has contributed to a spiralling of the securitization of migration in the EU.

## **A new securitization framework**

The core idea of the securitization framework, which was originally developed by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, in cooperation with other colleagues of the so-called ‘Copenhagen School’, is that there are no objective security issues that exist ‘out there’ (Buzan et al., 1998). In contrast, there are only issues that are socially constructed as security threats through processes of ‘securitisation’. Those can be defined as ‘processes of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat’ (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). Buzan’s and Wæver’s conceptualisation of securitization has a strong linguistic dimension, as they argue that security issues are socially constructed as such through ‘speech acts’ (Buzan et al., 1998: 26) (see also Wæver, 1995: 54-55). According to Wæver (1995: 55), ‘security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship)’. Moreover, the Copenhagen School claims that, by ‘uttering security’, the securitizing actor ‘moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it’ (Wæver, 1995: 55). From that perspective, securitization can be viewed as ‘the staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labelling it as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means’ (Buzan et al., 1998: 26). Moreover, the securitization framework is underpinned by a ‘traditional military-political understanding’ of security (Buzan et al., 1998: 21), which equates security with survival (see also Williams, 2003).

Over the years, the securitization framework has attracted much praise, but has also been criticised from various perspectives (see Balzacq et al., 2016). Scholars have also put forward ideas to further develop or refine the framework in several respects. Two issues are of particular importance for the purpose of this article. The first is the idea that issues cannot only be constructed as security issues discursively, but also through practices. The second concerns the understanding of security underpinning the securitization framework. These two issues are examined in turn in the remainder of this section.

With regard to the issue of discourses and practices, the securitization framework as it was originally developed by the Copenhagen School put a significant emphasis on the social construction of threats through securitizing ‘speech acts’. In other words, it highlighted the importance of discourse for the social construction of security threats. However, Buzan, Wæver and their colleagues themselves already observed that some practices, such as those of the security services of a state, may take place without any public discourse to acknowledge or justify them (Buzan et al., 1998: 28). They also noted that securitization may become institutionalised over time in cases of persistent or recurrent threats. In such instances, securitizing speech acts become unnecessary in their view (Buzan et al., 1998: 27-28). Thus, although Buzan and Wæver emphasised the discursive dimension of the social construction of security threats, they acknowledged themselves that there might be securitization dynamics at play even in the absence of securitizing speech acts.

This point was also made by Bigo (2000: 194), who argued that ‘[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'. In other words, non-discursive acts, such as the development of public policies or the establishment of institutional bodies, may matter as much as – if not more than - discourse in socially constructing an issue as a security threat. Moreover, Bigo (1998b; 2001b) highlighted that there can be significant differences between official discourses and everyday practices. With regard to the specific issue of migration, he argued that

[t]he securitization of immigration [...] emerges from the correlation between some successful speech acts of political leaders, the mobilization they create for and against some groups of people, and the specific field of security professionals [...]. It comes also 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).

Such ideas have been echoed by other scholars, including Huysmans (2004, 2006) who has emphasised the importance of examining security practices and their technological aspects. Likewise, Balzacq (2008: 75) has claimed that ‘rather than investigating the construction of threats at the level of discourse, we should focus on the function and implications of policy instruments used to meet a public problem’.

Such ideas are particularly relevant to this article and its investigation of Frontex, given the increasing emphasis placed on technology in the development of border practices in Europe. Over the last few years, European governments have increasingly invested in sophisticated technological devices in order to strengthen border security, including radars and sensors, camera

surveillance systems, unmanned aerial systems, and large-scale IT systems handling biometric data (Dijstelbloem and Meijer, 2011; Gerstein et al., 2018). Moreover, a focus on practices is more adequate in the case of a body like Frontex. Given its bureaucratic nature as a European agency, it is not prone to making official speeches in the same way as a President or Prime Minister (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019: 27).

Concerning the second issue, namely the understanding of security underpinning the securitization framework, this article moves away from the Copenhagen School's narrow understanding of security – which is equated with survival and involves existential threats – to adopt a broader understanding of security. From that perspective, the ideas of survival and existential threats are not abandoned, but are placed at the end of a continuum. As advocated by Abrahamsen (2005: 59), security issues can be conceptualised as '[moving] on a continuum from normalcy to worrisome/troublesome to risk and existential threat – and conversely, from threat to risk and back to normalcy'. This enables researchers to analyse how some issues may be subjected to a process intensifying their security-ness, whilst still falling short of being presented and dealt with as existential security threats (Williams, 2003: 521). From that viewpoint, existential threats, survival and arguably military practices can be seen as characterising the end point of this continuum, whereas the realm of security encompasses a broader part of the continuum than merely this end point. This conceptualisation is in line with the understanding of securitization as a spiralling process, which is at the heart of this special issue and which refers to the idea that the intensity of a phenomenon can increase or decrease in a dramatic fashion and over a short period of time (see Bello, forthcoming).

For these reasons, the securitization framework used in this article draws upon the Copenhagen School's work, but alters it in two significant ways. First of all, it focuses on security practices, rather than discourse, and conceptualises security as a continuum, rather than equating it with survival. As a result, the subsequent empirical analysis focuses on the practices deployed by Frontex and examines the extent to and the ways in which those can be considered to be 'securitizing practices', that is, practices conveying the meaning that the issue they are addressing is a security issue. This article argues that there are two main types of such securitizing practices. First of all, practices that are usually deployed to tackle issues that are widely seen as security issues, i.e. issues that were previously successfully securitized, such as a foreign armed attack or terrorism, can be seen as securitizing practices. For example, the deployment of military troops or military equipment such as tanks for dealing with an issue conveys the message that this issue is a security threat that requires addressing, thereby socially constructing this issue as a security threat. Another type of securitizing practices are cooperation practices with bodies or organisations that have traditionally been considered security bodies or organisations, such as those dealing with military or policing matters. The remainder of this article applies this analytical framework in order to analyse the role of Frontex in the securitization of migration in the EU. It focuses on the practices of Frontex in the context of two 'migration crises' separated by a decade in order to highlight the evolution in the practices of the Agency.

### **The practices of Frontex in the 2005-2006 'migration crisis'**

This section focuses on the first 'migration crisis' with which the EU as a whole – rather than some of its Member States – dealt, namely the 2005-2006 'crisis' at the Spanish external borders.

Although the Spanish authorities had at times seen large numbers of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants arrive since the 1990s, the events of 2005-2006 can be described as exceptional. Violent clashes between the border forces and migrants at the land borders between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla left 14 dead in the space of a few days in September 2005 (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019: 113). Whilst there had previously been deaths at the borders, never before had so many migrants died in such a short time period. Migration came back to the top of the political agenda a few months later, after large numbers of migrants and asylum-seekers began to leave West Africa by boat in order to reach the Canary Islands. These events were depicted as a ‘migration crisis’, which concerned not only Spain, but the entire EU.

This 2005-2006 ‘migration crisis’ is also worth examining because it saw the ‘baptism of fire’ of the newly created European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States (Frontex). This EU agency had been established by Council Regulation EC 2007/2004 of 26 October 2004 in order to coordinate operational cooperation amongst Member States with a view to enhancing security at the external borders of the EU Member States (Léonard, 2009). Its founding regulation had given Frontex six main tasks, namely (1) coordinating operational cooperation between Member States regarding the management of external borders; (2) assisting Member States in the training of national border guards, including establishing common training standards; (3) conducting risk analyses; (4) following up on developments in research relating to the control and surveillance of external borders; (5) assisting Member States when increased technical and operational assistance at external borders was required; and (6) assisting Member States in organising joint return operations (see Léonard, 2010).

The ‘migration crisis’ in Ceuta and Melilla did not lead to any immediate response from the EU, notably because the Spanish government did not request EU support. Nevertheless, the European Commission sent a ‘technical mission on illegal immigration’, which took place on 7-11 October 2005. Its main tasks were to evaluate the characteristics and the size of irregular migration flows from Africa through Morocco to the EU and to establish possible measures that would enhance the cooperation on irregular migration between the EU and Morocco. The mission report also noted that ‘[t]he technical mission did not seek to investigate the recent tragic incidents in Ceuta and Melilla nor did it aim to assess the ways that border management is carried out by Morocco or Spain’ (European Commission, 2005: 1). It is not surprising that the European Commission would explicitly refrain from commenting on the conduct of border controls at the external borders of one of the Member States of the EU, as those are the responsibility of the Member States. The final mission report included several proposals for developing an EU response to irregular migration into the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, but those concerned broad, long-term solutions (European Commission, 2005: 8-13).

In contrast, the EU played a more significant part in the response to the ‘migration crisis’ in the Canary Islands a few months later. This can notably be explained by the fact that the Spanish authorities requested EU assistance for dealing with the migration flows. At the end of May 2006, European Commissioner Franco Frattini declared that the Spanish government would receive operational assistance from the EU in order to address what he described as ‘an urgent and difficult situation’ (Brand, 2006). This assistance took the form of a joint operation coordinated by the newly established Frontex agency, which was only becoming operational

after it had been established by a Council Regulation in October 2004. The joint operation had a total budget of 3.5 million euros - 2.8 million of which were co-financed by Frontex – and comprised two ‘modules’, namely Hera I and Hera II.

Hera I began in July 2006 and entailed the deployment of national experts from various EU Member States, such as France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the UK, as well as Norway, to support their Spanish colleagues in establishing the identity and the country of origin of the migrants who had arrived on the Canary Islands. This helped the Spanish government return some of these migrants to their country of origin. In other words, Hera I was a largely technical operation with a very specific purpose (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019).

In contrast, Hera II was more ambitious and had a significantly broader scope. It was officially launched on 11 August 2006 for nine weeks. It was enthusiastically presented by EU Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs Frattini as a ‘truly historic moment in the history of the EU immigration policies and a very tangible expression of EU solidarity amongst Member States’ (Migration News Sheet, September 2006: 4). In addition, he highlighted the ‘humanitarian character’ of the operation, which, in his words, aimed ‘at saving lives at sea, as well as reducing illegal immigration and combating trafficking in human beings, a crime from which only traffickers benefit’ (Migration News Sheet, September 2006: 4).

However, Frattini’s statement turned out to be rather removed from the reality on the ground. In practice, the operation was significantly delayed, since it had been initially discussed to deploy the surveillance vessels and planes in June. There were various reasons for the delay, including

budgetary problems, a certain lack of interest in some EU Member States, as well as the willingness of the Spanish government to integrate the Senegalese and Mauritanian authorities into the operation, which led to further negotiations (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019). Moreover, Hera II ended up having a more modest scope than what had been anticipated. At the end of May, various EU Member States had signalled their willingness to participate in the joint sea operation. In practice, only three eventually confirmed that they would contribute assets to the operation. Finland offered a plane, Italy contributed a coast guard patrol boat and a plane, whilst Portugal sent a corvette (Frontex, 2006). Nevertheless, two weeks after Hera II had officially started, only the Portuguese corvette was actually conducting surveillance operations, given that the Finnish and Italian assets had still not been deployed (Migration News Sheet, October 2006: 7).

These setbacks led the Spanish government to repeat its request for EU assistance at the informal meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 21 September 2006. However, it was opposed by several EU Member States. Some of those, such as Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, made it clear that they considered the Spanish government to have encouraged migration flows by holding a massive amnesty of irregular migrants in spring 2005. Eventually, all the assets that had been promised were deployed and patrolled the coastal areas of Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde and the Canary Islands. The Mauritanian and Senegalese authorities also took part in the joint sea operation with their own equipment and personnel on the basis of a bilateral agreement signed with the Spanish government (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019). In its final press release regarding the operation, Frontex highlighted the humanitarian aspect of Hera II as it described its main aims as ‘to detect vessels setting off towards the Canary

Islands and to divert them back to their point of departure thus reducing the number of lives lost at sea'. It further noted that '[during] the course of the operation more than 3,500 migrants were stopped from this dangerous endeavour close to the African coast' (Léonard and Kaunert, 2019: 126). Operation Hera II came to a close in December 2006.

It was followed by Operation HERA III, which was launched in February 2007, following a request of the Spanish authorities. Risk analysis by Frontex had also confirmed the continued importance of the southern sea borders as one of the main routes for irregular migrants into the EU. In line with its two predecessors, Operation Hera III had two main dimensions. First, joint patrols involving aerial and naval means took place along the West African coast in a bid to reduce migration flows. Those were conducted in cooperation with the Senegalese authorities and involved several EU Member States, including Spain, Italy, Luxembourg and France. Second, it aimed to assist Spanish authorities with interviewing irregular migrants after their arrival on the Canary Islands in order to establish their country of origin and their identity, as well as gathering intelligence on their journey, including the involvement of smugglers. Various Member States, including Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and Portugal, contributed experts for these purposes (Frontex, 2007).

Thus, the role played by Frontex in the 2005-2006 'migration crisis' had three main components. First of all, it carried out risk analysis, which confirmed the continuous importance of Spain as a gateway to the EU for irregular migrants and asylum-seekers coming from Africa. Moreover, Frontex provided the Spanish authorities with technical assistance for the specific task of establishing the identity and the country of origin of migrants who had landed on the Canary

Islands, with a view to facilitating their return. Finally, the agency coordinated joint operations at sea involving the assets of various EU Member States. Such joint operations are arguably securitizing practices, in the sense that their enactment suggests that migration flows to Europe represent a security threat that needs to be addressed. Traditionally, such coordinated action at sea involving various states has been organised to tackle issues that are largely perceived to constitute security threats, such as military attacks, piracy, or drug trafficking. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the limited scope of the Hera joint sea operations in terms of their budget, the number of EU Member States involved, and the assets deployed.

### **The practices of Frontex in the 2015-2016 ‘migration crisis’**

Another major ‘migration crisis’ unfolded in Europe a few years later. The ‘crisis’ that had affected Spain had been followed by a quieter period in the Mediterranean. This considerably changed in 2014, which saw a sharp increase in the number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean in order to reach Europe, as well as the number of victims who lost their lives at sea. In 2015, the number of arrivals soared to over one million, whilst the tragic loss of lives at sea continued (European Parliament, 2016). In particular, in April 2015, a boat carrying about 700 migrants capsized 130 miles off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa, which caused the death of hundreds of migrants (BBC News, 2015). It was not only the fast rise in the number of arrivals that was remarkable, but also the important shift in migratory routes into Europe away from the Western routes and the Central Mediterranean route towards the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Balkan routes. This meant that Italy and Greece faced unprecedented numbers of arrivals on their shores as they became gateways to the EU for hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers and migrants. According to the UNHCR (2015), more than three quarters of

those arriving in Europe were fleeing from persecution and violence in Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan.

The sinking of the vessel on 19 April 2015 led to the organisation of a Special meeting of the European Council a few days later. A range of measures were announced at the end of the meeting, several of those concerning Frontex (European Council, 2015). Overall, the role played by Frontex in the response to this crisis in the following months was to be significantly more important than the role it had played in the 2005-2006 ‘migration crisis’ previously examined. It had three main dimensions: the coordination of joint operations, its participation in the so-called ‘hotspots’ and risk analysis.

Firstly, Frontex coordinated joint operations Triton and Poseidon, which supported Greece and Italy respectively. These two operations were already ongoing when it was decided to reinforce them at the April 2015 Special meeting of the European Council, notably by tripling their financial resources in 2015 and 2016 (European Council, 2015). The main focus of these operations was border control and surveillance, although they also included search and rescue activities (see Cusumano, 2019). In terms of their scope, they were significantly larger than the Hera operations previously analysed. For example, between January and August 2016, 667 Frontex officers were deployed, alongside 19 vessels, one aircraft and two helicopters as part of Operation Poseidon, whilst 523 Frontex officers, nine vessels, three aircraft and two helicopters participated in Operation Triton (European Commission, 2016). What is also noteworthy in comparison to the previous narrow focus of the Hera operations is the range of security issues

which Frontex tackled as part of these operations. As noted by the agency itself in the case of Triton,

[the] operational focus of Triton [expanded] to include other forms of cross border crime. Apart from numerous arrests of people smugglers, the assets deployed by the agency increasingly [contributed] to the detection of drug smuggling, illegal fishing and maritime pollution (Frontex, 2016).

In the course of Operation Triton, officers deployed by Frontex also assisted the Italian authorities in registering migrants and collected intelligence about the smuggling networks involved. This information was then passed on to the EU's Law Enforcement Agency (Europol) and the Italian authorities.

Another remarkable development in the context of these operations was the establishment of new practices of cooperation between Frontex and other actors dealing with 'harder' security issues, in particular the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which is a military alliance. Frontex developed tactical and operational cooperation with NATO following the decision by NATO's Defence ministers to deploy Standing Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) in the Aegean Sea in February 2016. This deployment aimed, in the own words of the alliance (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2016: 1), to 'support Greece and Turkey, as well as the European Union's border agency Frontex, in their efforts to tackle the refugee and migrant crisis'. NATO ships conducted reconnaissance, surveillance and monitoring in international waters, as well as in the territorial waters of Turkey and Greece. Thanks to liaison arrangements, including the deployment of Frontex liaison officers to the NATO operation, they were able to provide real-

time information to Frontex and to the Greek and Turkish coastguards (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 2016).

Secondly, Frontex played a key role in the ‘hotspots’, alongside other EU agencies, such as the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Europol and the EU’s Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust). The ‘hotspot’ approach was proposed by the European Commission as part of the European Agenda on Migration, which was unveiled in May 2015. As it had actually been in preparation for a few months, it was not entirely prompted by the dramatic migration-related events of the previous months. However, because of the time of publication, there has been a tendency to view it as the EU’s response to the ‘migration crisis’, which is not entirely correct. In its first part, the European Agenda on Migration identified priorities for immediate action, namely ‘saving lives at sea’, ‘targeting criminal smuggling networks’, ‘relocation’ for responding to the high numbers of arrivals, ‘resettlement’ for those in need of international protection, ‘working in partnership with third countries to tackle migration upstream’ and ‘using the EU’s tools to help frontline Member States’ (European Commission, 2015a). It is under that last heading that the European Commission indicated that it planned to develop a new ‘hotspot approach. It described it as follows:

the European Asylum Support Office, Frontex and Europol will work on the ground with frontline Member States to swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants. The work of the agencies will be complementary to one another (European Commission, 2015a: 6).

Frontex was also given the specific task of coordinating the return of those migrants found not to be in need of protection (European Commission, 2015a: 6), whereas EASO was expected to

support the efficient processing of asylum claims. As for Eurojust and Europol, they were tasked with helping the host Member States investigate and dismantle trafficking and smuggling networks. These ‘hotspots’ were expected to be established in some of the frontline Member States facing the arrival of large numbers of asylum-seekers and migrants. They were to be located at key arrival points in these countries with a view to managing the arrival of asylum-seekers and migrants in a more orderly manner, through a systematic and faster process of identification and registration.

In practice, the ‘hotspot’ approach was implemented in Greece and Italy, although other EU Member States could have also requested its implementation on their territory. 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. A report prepared for the European Parliament in 2016 observed that the ‘[rollout] of the hotspots proved initially sluggish, due in part to the need to build them from scratch and to remedy infrastructure shortcomings, but [...] gathered pace significantly [from] early 2016’ (European Parliament, 2016: 8). In addition to fingerprinting officers and translators, Frontex sent Joint Screening Teams, which assisted the EU Member States in the identification and the registration of the migrants, including their need of international protection. Frontex also deployed Joint Debriefing Teams, which conducted ‘interviews to collect information on the smuggling networks and the routes for the purpose of risk analysis and to feed criminal investigations’ (Frontex, n.d.). The relevant intelligence from these debriefing interviews was then passed on to Europol with a view to supporting investigations (European Commission, 2015b). The agency also assisted the Greek and Italian authorities with returning persons who do not have a right to remain in the EU,

including asylum-seekers whose claim had not been accepted. Thus, Frontex considerably developed its cooperation with Europol in the ‘hotspots’ and its work contributed to the investigation and dismantling of smuggling networks.

Thirdly, Frontex produced a significant amount of risk analysis during the 2015-2016 ‘migration crisis’. Those included Western Balkans Annual Risk Analyses, Eastern European Borders Annual Risk Analyses, Annual Risk Analyses, Frontex Risk Analysis Network Quarterly Reports, Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network Quarterly Reports and Eastern European Borders Risk Analysis Network Quarterly Reports. A particularly interesting type of report was the annual Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community Joint Reports. The so-called ‘Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community’ (AFIC) was established in 2010 with the aim of constituting a framework enabling the sharing of knowledge and intelligence relating to border security between Frontex and African countries. With a focus on Western Africa, its African membership has steadily grown over the years. The AFIC Joint Reports indicate that participants in these meetings in 2015-2016 were not only discussing irregular migration, but also ‘harder’ security issues, such as terrorism (including al-Shabaab and Boko Haram) and organised crime (Frontex, 2016, 2017).

Thus, one can see that the 2015-2016 ‘migration crisis’ has led to an intensification of the security-ness of the practices of Frontex to a significant extent. This is particularly visible in the deployment of practices usually aimed at tackling widely accepted security threats, such as maritime joint operations that have become significantly more sophisticated than they were in the first years of Frontex’s activities. Another remarkable development during that period is the

development of Frontex's cooperation with bodies that have a stronger security profile, such as NATO – which is a military alliance – and Europol in the field of law enforcement. In that way, Frontex has assumed a key role in the collection and production of not only migration intelligence, but also other types of intelligence linked to 'harder' security threats, such as organised crime and terrorism. These qualitative changes in the security-ness of Frontex's practices are in line with the idea of the spiralling of the securitization of migration, as developed by Bello (forthcoming).

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to investigate the evolving security practices of one of the key actors in the handling of asylum-seekers and migrants at the external borders of the EU Member States, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, widely referred to as 'Frontex'. It did so by applying a revised version of the Copenhagen School's securitization framework, which focuses on security practices and is underpinned by an understanding of security as belonging to a continuum, rather than being equated with survival and existential threats. The article has compared and contrasted the practices of Frontex in the context of two significant 'migration crises' in the Mediterranean, in 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, respectively. The analysis of the more recent practices of the Agency during the 2015-2016 'migration crisis' shows that this 'crisis' has led to an intensification of the security practices of the Agency, including the coordination of more sophisticated joint operations, the growing cooperation with security bodies, such as Europol and NATO, as well as the contribution to the collection and production of intelligence on various security issues. In the last few years, Frontex has therefore moved towards the end point of the security continuum, which is characterised by survival, existential

threats, and militarisation. This has contributed to a spiralling of the securitization of migration in the EU.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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#### **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> In this article, the idea of 'migration crisis' is always presented in quotation marks to emphasise the socially constructed nature of such a 'crisis'.