Caio Ferraz Levy

The Emotional Politics of Security in the EU's Migration Management

Secção

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The Emotional Politics of Security in the EU's Migration Management

As Políticas Emocionais de Segurança na Gestão Migratória da UE

Caio Ferraz LEVY[1]

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the securitisation of migration in the EU through the lens of emotions, revisiting securitisation theory in light of the emotional turn in International Relations. Focusing specifically on the role of emotions in speech acts, it analyses how affective expressions contribute to the formulation and legitimation of extraordinary security policies. The empirical study examines two key periods: the 2015–2016 refugee crisis and the 2023–2024 implementation of the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, investigating how the emotional framing of migrants as security threats has evolved in the speeches of the European Commission and in corresponding border policies. Situated at the intersection of critical security studies, border studies, and the sociology of emotions, the research employs Emotion Discourse Analysis to show how the affective construction of migration as a security threat legitimises restrictive measures. The study finds that fear, pity, and compassion recur as central discursive tropes, shaping the representation of migrants not only in moments of crisis but across periods of routine governance. These emotions therefore function as conditions of possibility for the securitisation of migration and the formulation of EU border policies in a continuous and transversal manner.
KEYWORDS: Securitisation; Migration; Borders; Emotions; Discourse Analysis

RESUMO: Este artigo explora a securitização das migrações na UE através da lente das emoções, revisitando a teoria da securitização à luz da viragem emocional nas Relações Internacionais. Focando-se especificamente no papel das emoções nos atos de discurso, analisa como as expressões afetivas contribuem para a formulação e legitimação de políticas de segurança extraordinárias. O estudo empírico centra-se em dois períodos-chave: a crise dos refugiados de 2015–2016 e a implementação do Pacto da UE sobre Migração e Asilo em 2023–2024, investigando como a construção emocional dos migrantes enquanto ameaças à segurança evoluiu nos discursos da Comissão Europeia e nas políticas fronteiriças correspondentes. Situada na interseção dos estudos críticos de segurança, estudos de fronteira e sociologia das emoções, a investigação recorre à análise de discurso com foco nas emoções para mostrar como a construção afetiva da migração como ameaça à segurança legitima medidas restritivas. O estudo conclui que o medo, a piedade e a compaixão são narrativas recorrentes, moldando a representação dos migrantes não apenas em momentos de crise, mas também em períodos de governação rotineira. Estas emoções funcionam, portanto, como condições de possibilidade para a securitização da migração e a formulação de políticas fronteiriças da UE de forma contínua.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Securitização; Migrações; Fronteiras; Emoções; Análise de Discurso

[1] Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, PhD in Political Science, University of Tübingen, 72074, Tübingen, Germany; email: caio.ferraz-levy@student.uni-tuebingen.de, https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2136-966X

Introduction

Securitisation theories have offered influential frameworks for analysing security developments in international politics. Initially developed by the Copenhagen School of security studies[2], these theories have sought to reconceptualise security not as a response to objectively given threats, but as the outcome of discursive constructions[3]. Most recently, the emergence of new theoretical lenses in International Relations (IR) has influenced these frameworks. Notably, the so-called "emotional turn" in IR has prompted scholars to reconsider securitisation from the angle of emotions, understanding the discursive and social construction of security threats as an inherently affective process[4].

A subject long studied through securitisation theory has been the EU's migration and border policies. Scholars such as Bigo[5] and Huysmans[6] have shown how migration has been framed as a security threat through the EU's discourses and practices, ultimately legitimising increasingly restrictive border controls and giving rise to the notion of "Fortress Europe". From this perspective, the framing of the migrant Other as a security threat has historically sustained the reinforcement of the EU's common external borders since the establishment of the Schengen area, advancing both the externalisation and militarisation of the European integrated border regime[7].

Yet, despite extensive research on the securitisation of migration in the EU, little

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[2] BUZAN, Barry and WÆVER, Ole. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. ISBN 9780511491252;
HANSEN, Lene. *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge, 2006. ISBN 9780415335751;
WÆVER, Ole. Politics, security, theory. *Security Dialogue*, 2011, 42(4-5), pp. 465-480. ISSN 0967-0106;
WÆVER, Ole. The theory act: Responsibility and exactitude as seen from securitization. *International Relations*, 2015, 29(1), pp. 121-127. ISSN 0047-1178.
[3] WÆVER, Ole. Securitization and Desecuritization. In: LIPSCHUTZ, Ronnie. D. *On Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 46-87. ISBN: 9780231102711
[4] VAN RYTHOVEN, Eric. Learning to feel, learning to fear? Emotions, Imaginaries, and limits in the politics of securitization. *Security Dialogue*, 2015 46(5), pp. 458-475. ISSN 0967-0106. DOI: 10.1177/0967010615574766.
[5] BIGO, Didier. The (in)securitization practices of the three universes of EU border control: Military/Navy – border guards/police – database analysts. *Security Dialogue*, 2014, 45(3), pp. 209–225. ISSN 0967-0106. DOI: 10.1177/0967010614530459
[6] HUYSMANS, Jef. The European Union and the securitization of migration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2000, 38(5), pp. 751–777. ISSN 0021-9886. DOI: 10.1111/1468-5965.00263
[7] DIAS, Vanda Amaro. & FREIRE, Maria Raquel. Insecurities in EU border management: The unintended consequences of securitization processes in the Mediterranean. *Methaodos Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 2022, 10(2), pp. 297–311. ISSN 2340-8413. DOI: 10.17502/mrcs.v10i2.561
LÉONARD, Sarah and KAUNERT, Christian. De-Centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey. *Geopolitics*, 2022, 27(3), pp. 729-751. ISSN 1465-0045. DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2021.1929183.

attention has been paid to the specific role of emotions in this process. Existing studies remain limited to analyses of how affects shaped the EU's decision-making during the refugee crisis[8] and the evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership[9]. As such, the processes of EU migration governance and border-making remain underexplored from the angle of emotions. To fill this gap, this paper examines the role of emotions in the EU's securitisation of migration by analysing and comparing discursive material from two key periods: 2015/2016 and 2023/2024. This choice was grounded on two relevant policy frameworks put forward by the European Commission, namely the European Agenda on Migration plus the EU-Turkey deal in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis, and the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024. This approach contributes to the existing literature by tracing registers of emotion across both periods and, most importantly, by assessing how these discourses evolved throughout time along with the EU's migration and border policies, shedding light on continuity or disruption in emotion discourse.

Methodologically, the study applies a qualitative discourse analysis inspired by Koschut's[10] Emotion Discourse Analysis (EDA) to official speeches issued by the European Commission. The aim was to illuminate how discursive displays of emotion operate to justify migration and border policies. In this way, the discursive material was examined for explicit references to emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, compassion), for expressions carrying emotional connotations (e.g., panic, suffering, misery) and for broader narratives whose meaning and force were shaped by emotional content (e.g. metaphors of invasion and stories of drownings in the Mediterranean). These tropes were cross-referenced with existing literature on the sociology of emotions[11] and migration discourse[12], identifying two dominant affective registers in the Commission's

[8] SANCHEZ SALGADO, Rosa M. Emotions in the European Union's Decision-Making: The Reform of the Dublin System in the Context of the Refugee Crisis. *Innovations: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 2022, 35(1), pp. 14-38. ISSN 1351-1610. DOI: 10.1080/13511610.2021.1968355.

[9] BLANC, Emmanuelle. The EU in Motion Through Emotions: Fear and Migration Policy in the Euro-Mediterranea Context. *Mediterranean Politics*, 2023, 30(1), pp. 1-26. ISSN 1362-9395. DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2023.2265258.

[10] KOSCHUT, Simon. Speaking from the Heart: Emotion Discourse Analysis in International Relations. In: CLÉMENT, Maéva and SANGAR, Eric. *Researching Emotions in International Relations*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 277–302. ISBN 978-3-319-65574-1.

[11] AHMED, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second Edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. ISBN 9789748691135

[12] DE HAAS, Hein. Changing the migration narrative: On the power of discourse, propaganda and truth distortion. *International Migration Institute Working Paper* [online]. May 2024, vol. 181, pp. 1-25 [Accessed 28 May 2024]. Available from: https://www.migrationinstitute.org/publications/changing-the-migration-narrative-on-the-power-of-discourse-propaganda-and-truth-distortion.

framing of migration: fear and compassion. Finally, the discourse analysis was complemented by an examination of migration and border policies advanced in the selected contexts. Accordingly, the analysis aimed to highlight how emotions contributed to the EU's securitisation of migration and the subsequent policies developed.

As a result, the study suggests that a consistent pattern underlies the EU's affective framing of migration. This framing is not limited to periods of crisis, as the comparison of the two periods indicates, and it informs policies aimed at continuously strengthening border control. In doing so, the paper contributes not only to scholarship on the EU's migration and border governance but also to the broader emotional turn in IR and its application to securitisation theory.

The article is structured as follows: first, it presents the theoretical framework, linking securitisation theory with the emotional turn in IR; next, it provides a detailed account of the EDA methodology. The analysis then examines the 2015/2016 period, showing how emotional registers are present in the Commission's discourses, followed by a discussion of the European Agenda on Migration and its role in reinforcing the EU's external borders. The article then turns to the 2023/2024 period and the Pact on Migration and Asylum, demonstrating how the EU's emotional discourse has remained consistent and continues to support the strengthening of its external borders.

Emotions and securitisation theory

Discursive approaches to security reject the notion that security threats, whether objective or subjective, exist as pre-given realities. Instead, they assert that such threats are socially constructed through discourses[13]. That means that "For problems or facts to become questions of security, they need therefore to be successfully constructed as such within political discourse"[14]. Building up on that, securitisation theories emphasize the centrality of the discursive construction of threats in enabling the formulation and implementation of security policies. For Wæver[15], this happens through speech acts, whereby a securitising actor depicts a certain issue as a security threat to a referential audience, which in turn justifies the call for extraordinary policy

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[13] BUZAN, Barry and HANSEN, Lene. *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. ISBN 9780521694223.

[14] HANSEN, Lene. *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge, 2006. ISBN 9780415357029. Pp. 33-34.

[15] WÆVER, 1995.

measures.

On the other hand, some varíants of securitisation theory have suggested that threat construction can also occur with little or no discursive practices at all, being instead enacted through security practices (e.g. risk assessment, military operations, and other policy outcomes that may occur without a discourse justifying them) instead of speech acts[16]. Nevertheless, the speech act remains an influential theoretical foreground for analysing securitisation. Wæver[17], for instance, acknowledges that recognising the role of security practices in securitisation represents an important contribution. However, he argues that this perspective overlooks the co-productive nature of securitisation, implying that it could occur without the involvement of an audience. The variants converge, however, on the notion that policy responses to perceived threats are situated as extraordinary politics that wouldn't occur in everyday political life had the issue not been successfully framed as a security threat[18].

According to Balzacq[19], speech acts are mechanisms in which "the strategic action of discourse operates at the level of persuasion and uses various artefacts (metaphors, emotions, stereotypes, gestures, silence, and even lies)" to construct threats and call for extraordinary policy action. Drawing upon this conceptual ground, van Rythoven[20] specifically focuses on the emotional features of speech acts to define securitisation as an emotional phenomenon. He argues that the success of a securitising move depends essentially on the emotional appraisals of the audience regarding the perceived threat, demonstrating how the emotional turn in IR has influenced securitisation theory.

The emotional turn refers to the growing body of scholarship examining how emotions shape international politics[21]. Long overlooked in mainstream accounts,

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[16] BALZACQ, Thierry. *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2011. ISBN 0-203-86850-1

[17] WÆVER, 2015.

[18] WILLIAMS, Michael C. Securitization as political theory: The politics of the extraordinary. *International Relations*, 29(1), 2015, pp. 114–120. ISSN: 0047-1178. DOI: 10.1177/0047117814526606c

[19] BALZACQ, 2011, p. 2.

[20] VAN RYTHOVEN, 2015.

[21] BLEIKER, Roland, and Emma HUTCHINSON. Fear no more: Emotions and world politics. *Review of International Studies*, 2008, 34(S1), pp. 115–135. ISSN 0260-2105. DOI: 10.1017/S0260210508007821.
CRAWFORD, Neta C. The passion of world politics: Propositions on emotion and emotional relationships. *International Security*, 2000, 24(4), pp. 116–156. ISSN 0162-2889. DOI: 10.1162/016228800560327.
KOSCHUT, Simon. Feeling European? The EU as an emotional community. *Journal of European Integration*, 2024, 46(5), pp. 597–613. ISSN 0703-6337. DOI: 10.1080/07036337.2024.2358883.

emotions have increasingly been recognised as a valid theoretical lens for understanding how foreign policy is shaped by affective ideas and judgements embedded in discourses, images, and wider socio-cultural narratives[22], being a promising lens to explore securitisation processes, especially from the angle of the speech act.

Scholars contributing to the emotional turn in IR generally do not conceive emotions as subjective inner states but as discursively represented phenomena, positioning speech acts as a key site where emotions can be traced in foreign policy[23]. Given the notorious difficulty of defining and quantifying emotions, these scholars have focused on analysing them as socially constructed expressions strategically deployed to elicit political responses, drawing on the sociology of emotions[24] to examine emotional registers as discursive resources embedded in speech acts..

Against this backdrop, Van Rythoven[25] and Ganz[26] have explicitly used emotions to understand securitisation processes of empirical cases such as indigenous protests in Canada and energy in Azerbaijan, demonstrating how threat construction is linked to public displays of emotions in political discourse. Transposing the theoretical foundations of emotions in securitisation theory to the case of EU border and migration policy, Sanchez-Salgado[27] explored the reform of the Dublin system during the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe from the angle of emotions, focusing on how the EU's decision-making process in that context may have been influenced by emotions such as fear. Blanc[28] has also sustained these arguments, exploring the role of fear in the evolution of the Euro-mediterranean partnership.

Therefore, analysing securitisation processes through the lens of emotions has emerged as a promising approach, enriching discursive perspectives on security and incorporating insights from the emotional turn in IR into empirical research. Building on

MERCER, Jonathan. Emotional Beliefs. *International Organization*, 2010, 64(1), pp. 1–31. ISSN 0020-8183. DOI: 10.1017/S0020818309990221.

[22] ARIFFIN, Yohan. Assessing the Role of Emotives in International Relations. In: ARIFFIN, Yohan; COICAUD, Jean-Marc; and POPOVSKI, Vesselin. *Emotions in International Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021,* pp. 207–220. ISBN 9781316286838.

[23] KOSCHUT, 2018.

[24] AHMED, 2014.

[25] VAN RYTHOVEN, Eric. A Feeling of Unease: Distance, Emotion, and Securitizing Indigenous Protest in Canada. *International Political Sociology*, 2021, 15(2), pp. 251-271. ISSN 1749-5687. DOI: 10.1093/ips/olab008.

[26] GANZ, Aurora. Emotions and securitisation: A new materialist discourse analysis. *European Journal of International Relations.* 2023, 00(0), 1-26. ISSN 1354-0661. DOI: 10.1177/13540661221151038

[27] SANCHEZ-SALGADO, 2022.

[28] BLANC, 2023.

this, the paper examines the role of emotions in speech acts, following the discursive variant of securitisation theory, to explore how discursive displays of emotions may influence the EU's migration and border policies.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative discourse analysis approach inspired by Koschut's[29] Emotion Discourse Analysis (EDA). Consistent with the theoretical framework that guides this study, discourse analysis methods have been used to demonstrate how security threats are not objectively given but discursively constructed through speech acts[30]. In this way, discourse is understood as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic[31].

EDA understands 'emotion discourse' as discursive practices in which actors frame subjects under emotional categories, using emotions as "socially constructed representations of meaning that are linked to conceptions of identity and power."[32] In this way, instead of seeking to quantify emotions in the EU's rhetoric on migration, this study understands discourse itself as a mechanism capable of shaping the perception of migration as a security threat using registers of emotion.

The discursive material was selected from two timeframes: 2015–2016 and 2023–2024. The first period corresponds to the so-called refugee crisis, during which multiple instruments were proposed and adopted to reshape the EU's integrated border regime, including the reinforcement of military operations in the Mediterranean and the externalisation of border control through the EU–Turkey refugee deal. The second period was chosen for its proximity to the implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024. Each timeframe spans two years to capture both the discourses preceding and those following major policy developments, thereby enriching the analysis. The goal was to determine whether emotions emerge more strongly in times of crisis (2015–2016) or consistently permeate the EU's discourses on migration. The European Commission was selected as the central institution of

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[29] KOSCHUT, 2018.
[30] HANSEN, 2006.
[31] HALL, Stuart. The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power. In: HALL, Stuart and GIEBEN, Bram. *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, pp. 275–320. 1992. ISBN 0745609600. p. 277.
[32] KOSCHUT, 2018, p. 277.

analysis not only because of its institutional authority and agenda-setting power, but also due to its role in proposing key developments in EU migration and border policy during the two periods. Accordingly, discourse analysis was conducted on primary sources material in the form of official speeches, statements, and policy documents produced by the European Commission and its representants.

Discourses were searched focusing on three levels. First, explicit references to emotions (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, compassion). Second, expressions carrying emotional connotations (e.g., panic, suffering, misery), noted for their affective resonance within broader argumentative structures. Third, narratives whose meaning and persuasive force were shaped by emotional content, such as metaphors of invasion or stories of drownings in the Mediterranean. These instances were not treated as isolated lexical items, but as discursive tropes whose emotional charge contributes to the construction of migration as a security threat. To strengthen interpretive validity, the analysis cross-referenced these tropes with existing scholarship on the sociology of emotions[33] and on migration discourse[34].

This iterative process allowed the identification of two dominant affective registers in the Commission's framing of migration: fear and compassion. The analysis concluded by explaining how the migration and border policies put forward in each period reinforced the EU's border regime, situating them as the extraordinary policy outcomes resulting from the framing of migration as a security threat, as posed by securitisation theory.

Emotions and security in the 2015 refugee crisis

> *A Europe without borders can't survive in the present conditions. Our society is built on certain premises of organised solidarity that would be undermined if we simply would say that everybody can come in.[35]*

These were the words of First Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, during a press conference, in September 2015. The statement

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[33] AHMED, 2014.

[34] DE HAAS, 2024.

[35] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Opening Remarks of First Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos at Kos Press Conference* [online]. 04 September 2015 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_5595. Para. 8.

came amid a surge of individuals seeking asylum in Europe, which exposed major weaknesses in the European asylum system, particularly the Dublin regulations, under which responsibility for processing asylum claims fell to the country of first arrival[36]. This arrangement placed pressure on frontline states such as Greece and Italy, a strain exacerbated by widespread migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean. Together, these developments crystallised into what became known as the refugee crisis.

Against this backdrop, the crisis was increasingly entangled with a security discourse that framed migration as an existential threat. Timmermans' assertion that "Europe can't survive" without borders is emblematic of a securitising move: it casts the crisis not as a humanitarian phenomenon but as a danger to the EU's very existence. The word "undermined" amplifies this sense of vulnerability, evoking fragility and anxiety over the stability of Europe's "organised solidarity." Similarly, the phrase "if we simply say that everybody can come in" depicts migrants not as individuals seeking protection but as potential destabilisers, threatening social cohesion. The statement also establishes a binary position between a stable, civilised Europe and chaotic, uncontrolled migratory flows—concluding with an implicit call to reinforce external borders.

As van Rythoven[37] argues, securitisation succeeds only when the threat articulated resonates with the audience's emotional imaginary. His later study of indigenous protests in Canada[38] shows that it was not simply the protests themselves, but the fear they evoked, that enabled them to be securitised. Fear, in this sense, appears as a central characteristic for the success of securitising moves. In Timmermans' speech, the phrase "can't survive" therefore functions not merely as a descriptive claim but as a register of fear. It signals an existential risk that resonates with collective anxieties about Europe's cohesions and safety, portraying migration as a force that could unravel social order. Through this affective register, the Commission's discourse helped secure the conditions for exceptional measures to reinforce Europe's borders.

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[36] COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. *Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national* [online]. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 050, 25 February 2003, pp. 1–10 [viewed 26 August 2025]. Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A32003R0343
[37] VAN RYTHOVEN, 2015.
[38] VAN RYTHOVEN, 2021.

Ahmed[39] contends that "fear works by establishing others as fearsome insofar as they *threaten to take the self in*", constructing the Other as a danger not only to the self as self but to one's very life and existence as a separate being. It is thus tied to the preservation of an established order perceived as under threat from an external Other. Importantly, Ahmed stresses that fear responds not to what is already present but to what is approaching[40]. This temporal and spatial orientation means that fear intensifies as the distance between Self and Other diminishes.

The register of fear was further amplified through the representation of numbers. The Commission's discourses repeatedly highlighted the scale of arrivals. For example, Commissioner for Migration Dimitris Avramopoulos stated in February 2016 that "2015 has been the year of many records. More than one million people arrived at the Greek and Italian shores. More than 1.2 million applied for asylum in the EU"[41]. Such quantitative references reinforced the argument that the Union was facing an "unprecedented influx of migrants at our borders."[42]

As de Haas[43] observes, number and statistics often work in tandem with water metaphors (e.g. waves, tides, floods) as a strategy of fearmongering that frames migration as an apocalyptic force and establish a "mass migration narrative". In the Commission's discourses, expressions such as "many records," "more than," and "unprecedented influx" illustrate how magnitude itself becomes an affective device. The accumulation of numerical references constructs migration as overwhelming, uncontainable, evoking urgency and pressure. In Ahmed's[44] terms, such discourse performs fear by projecting an "approaching" danger, threatening to engulf the European self. Therefore, these figures do not merely report data but reinforce a narrative of crisis and loss of control, heightening the perception of threat through statistical and metaphorical devices that embed migration within a discourse of fear.

Yet, fear was not the only emotional trope identified in the Commission's

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[39] AHMED, 2014, p. 64, italics in the original.
[40] Ibid., p. 65.
[41] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Keynote Speech by Commissioner Avramopoulos at the 2016 Harvard European Conference: Europe at the Crossroads of the Migration and Security Crises* [online]. 20 February 2016 [viewed 26 August 2025]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_16_365. Para. 7.
[42] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos on the situation in the Mediterranean at the LIBE Committee in the European Parliament* [online]. 14 April 2015 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_4774. Para. 17.
[43] DE HAAS, 2024.
[44] AHMED, 2014.

speeches during the 2015 refugee crisis. Rhetoric on invasion and unprecedented refugee flows often appeared alongside a humanitarian trope that framed refugees and asylum seekers as vulnerable subjects in need of protection, creating a paradoxical counterpoint to registers of fear. In a speech by Jean-Claude Juncker at the Conclusion of the European Council meeting of 15 October 2015, he described the following scene:

> *Last week, along the Western Balkans route, we saw refugees wading through freezing rivers. We saw them sleeping in the rain and mud. Soon, this will be snow and ice. Winter is approaching and every day counts.*[45]

Unlike the fear-laden discourse, this statement does not portray refugees as an existential danger to the Union. Instead, it positions them as vulnerable subjects whose lives are at risk. The emotional register is constructed through vivid sensory imagery ("wading through freezing rivers" and "sleeping in the rain and mud") along the looming threat of "snow and ice" as "winter is approaching." Such expressions foreground the suffering body, drawing attention to the physical precarity of refugees and appealing to compassion rather than anxiety.

Ahmed[46] argues that "the language of pain operates through signs, which convey histories that involve injuries to bodies […] In doing so, the audience is expected to be moved by the injuries of others, invoking emotional reactions." From this angle, Juncker's speech constructs the migrant Other not as a threat but as a vulnerable subject through the language of pain. This mobilises registers of pity (we feel sorry for refugees), compassion (we are called to care), and suffering (their plight is physically evoked). However, an important feature of this framing is that the agency of refugees is muted: they are not speakers, only seen by the EU ("we saw refugees…"). The language of pain ultimately "sticks" to subjects, reifying them as perpetual victims and rendering suffering as an essential characteristic of the Other. Within this interplay, the EU is positioned as the witness to suffering, claiming moral authority through observation. Finally, the call that "every day counts" transforms witnessing into an obligation to act, concluding the securitising move.

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[45] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Conclusions of the European Council meeting of 15 October 2015 and the Leader's Meeting on refugee flows along the Western Balkan route of 25 October 2015 – Speech by President Juncker at the European Parliament plenary session* [online]. 27 October 2015 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_5935. Para. 2.
[46] AHMED, 2014.

Other examples of pity and compassion in the Commission's discourses during 2015/2016 illustrate this logic. References to humanitarian disasters (e.g.: "thousands of lives were lost in the Mediterranean over the past few years"[47]) grounded legitimacy in the suffering of migrants and framed EU action as moral responsibility. The precariousness of refugees was likewise dramatized in descriptions of "more than 12,000 people stranded in Idomeni" in "dire health and sanitary conditions[48], or of "boats abandoned and left do drift dangerously"[49].

Hein de Haas[50] identifies this as the migrant victim narrative, where suffering is framed as the work of violent smugglers and becomes a moral issue demanding intervention. This framing is reinforced by the EU's performative language of enforcement: "fighting," "combating," and "cracking down" on smuggling networks. As one statement puts it, "We must do everything in our power to win the war we have declared against the smugglers"[51]. Positioned against the construction of refugees as suffering bodies, this rhetoric creates a moral economy in which pity legitimises intervention while obscuring the structural violence of the EU's border policies.

Indeed, it has been argued that migrant's reliance on smugglers is itself a consequence of the EU's restrictions on legal entry channels[52]. Migrants are compelled to use smugglers precisely because border regimes deny them safe mobility. From this perspective, the figure of the smuggler is less an unscrupulous criminal than a service-provider made necessary by European border policies. The use of a language of pain in migration discourse illustrates Ahmed's insight that stories about bodily injury often conceal the work of other bodies[53], suggesting that "stories of

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[47] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Migration; a joint European responsibility* [online]. 19 February 2015, [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_4455. Para. 2.

[48] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Speech by Commissioner Avramopoulos at the EESC plenary debate on the European Agenda on Migration* [online]. 16 March 2016 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_16_5448. Paras. 5-7.

[49] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Keynote speech of Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos at the first European Migration Forum* [online]. 27 January 2015 [viewed 1 July 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_3781. Para. 2.

[50] DE HAAS, 2024.

[51] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Remarks by Commissioner Avramopoulos following his visit to Austria* [online]. 7 September 2015, para. 37 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_5605. Para. 37.

[52] MORENO-LAX, Violeta. The EU Humanitarian Border and the Securitization of Human Rights: The 'Rescue-Through-Interdiction/Rescue-Without-Protection' Paradigm. *Journal of Common Market Studies,*2018, 56(1), pp. 119-140. ISSN 0021-9886. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12651.

[53] AHMED, 2014, p. 21.

pain involve complex relations of power"[54].

Aradau[55] makes a similar point in her analysis of discourses of pity. Studying representations of immigrant sex workers in the EU, she shows that depictions of vulnerability justified politics of fear that reinforced the EU's borders. Hence, politics of pity and politics of fear are not contradictory but mutually enabling in the securitisation of migration. Migrants are simultaneously positioned as "a risk" and "at risk"[56], caught in an affective framework that frames them both as victims of exploitation and as potential threats. The result is a moral justification for policies that tighten border security, criminalise smugglers, and externalise migration control.

As a response to the refugee crisis, in May 2015 the European Commission launched the European Agenda on Migration, which outlined a set of "immediate measures" to address the situation[57]. The first of these measures involved tripling the capacities of Frontex's Triton and Poseidon operations in the Mediterranean, aimed at identifying and rescuing boats in distress. While framed as humanitarian initiatives, these operations have been widely interpreted as reinforcements of border control. For instance, Dias and Freire[58] show how these operations created new insecurities for migrants seeking to cross, while Léonard & Kaunert[59] highlight their continuous expansion in scope and budget. Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins[60] go further, arguing that such interventions exacerbated the crisis by forcing migrants to rely more heavily on smugglers.

Another key measure in the Agenda for Migration was the proposal of a hotspot approach, whereby the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), Frontex, Europol, and Eurojust worked alongside frontline states to identity and register migrants, assess protection needs, and coordinate returns when asylum was deemed inapplicable. This

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[54] Ibid., p. 22.

[55] ARADAU, Claudia. The perverse politics of four-letter words: Risk and pity in the securitisation of human trafficking. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2004, 33(2), pp. 251–277. ISSN 0305-8298.

[56] GRAY, Harriet and FRANCK, Anja K. Refugees as/at risk: The gendered and racialized underpinnings of securitization in British media narratives. *Security Dialogue*, 2019, 50(3), pp. 275–291. ISSN 0967-0106. DOI: 10.1177/0967010619830590

[57] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Managing migration better in all aspects: A European Agenda on Migration* [online]. 12 May 2015 [viewed 25 August 2025]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_15_4956

[58] DIAS & FREIRE, 2022.

[59] LÉONARD & KAUNERT, 2022.

[60] JEANDESBOZ, Julien, and Pallister-WILKINS, Polly. Crisis, Routine, Consolidation: The Politics of the Mediterranean Migration Crisis. *Mediterranean Politics*, 2016, 21(2), pp. 316–320. ISSN 1362-9395. DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2016.1145825.

approach was also criticised as part of the EU's broader fortification of borders. As de Vries and Guild[61] argue, hotspots functioned as zones of containment, where mobility was fractured through processes of identification and sorting. These processes often diverged from international and EU legal standards, with asylum eligibility being determined through untranslated questionnaires or racial profiling, with certain nationalities disproportionately detained, suggesting that these sites became de facto deportation zones.

The most consequential step in the EU's crisis response came with the 18 March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement[62], which stipulated that all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands would be returned, while for every Syrian sent back another would be resettled from Turkey to an EU Member State. In exchange, the EU pledged accelerated visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens and €6 billion in funding through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. This agreement epitomised the logic of border externalisation, whereby migration control is subcontracted to non-European states to "pre-empt migratory movements before they even reach European territory"[63]. In this way, through pre-entry controls, readmission agreements, and the strengthening of asylum systems in third countries, the EU effectively governs migration at a distance. This approach was not unique to 2015, as externalisation has long been central to EU border governance, from Libya to broader partnerships across the African continent[64].

The emotional tropes underpinning these policies are visible in official statements, as the Commission's press release presenting the Agenda on Migration exemplifies: "The plight of thousands of migrants putting their lives in peril to cross the Mediterranean has shocked and it has become clear that no Member State can or

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[61] DE VRIES, Leonie Ansems. and GUILD, Elspeth. Seeking Refuge in Europe: Spaces of Transit and the Violence of Migration Management." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2019, 45(12), pp. 2156-2166. ISSN 1369-183X. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468308.

[62] EUROPEAN COUNCIL. *EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016* [online]. 18 March 2016 [viewed 25 August 2025]. Available from: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/

[63] DE GENOVA, Nicholas. Introduction: The Borders of "Europe" and the European Question. In: DE GENOVA Nicholas. *The Borders of "Europe": Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 1-35. ISBN 9780822369188. P. 12.

[64] MÜLLER, Patrick and SLOMINSKI, Peter. Breaking the Legal Link but Not the Law? The Externalization of EU Migration Control Through Orchestration in the Central Mediterranean. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2021, 28(6), pp. 801-820. ISSN 1350-1763. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1751243.

SAVIO VAMMEN, Idda M.; COLD-RAVNKILDE, Signe and LUCHT, Hans. Borderwork in the Expanded EU-African Borderlands. *Geopolitics*, 2022, 27(5), pp. 1317-1330. ISSN 1465-0045. DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2022.2008734.

should be left alone to address huge migratory pressures"[65]. Here, the migrant victim narrative ("migrants putting their lives in peril") is paired with the mass migration narrative ('huge migratory pressures"), mobilising compassion and fear simultaneously.

The same document also refers to a speech by Frans Timmermans, who states: "The tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean has shocked all Europeans. Our citizens expect Member States and European institutions to act to prevent this tragedy from continuing unbated"[66]. This statement illustrates how the register of compassion ("tragic loss of life") is transformed into a securitised discourse as the "shock" experienced by Europeans legitimises extraordinary measures. Vice-President Dombrovskis's speech at the European Parliament on the EU-Turkey deal also echoes this logic, claiming that the agreement would "help us to break the business model of smugglers who exploit human misery"[67]. The reference to "human misery" resonates with the language of pain that constructs migrants' victimhood, serving to justify the EU's externalisation of border control to Turkey.

Taken together, these examples show how the securitisation of migration during the 2015 refugee crisis relied on two emotional tropes operating as mutual conditions of possibility for the strengthening of the EU's external borders: a mass migration narrative infused with registers of fear, and a migrant victims narrative shaped by pity and compassion. While seemingly at odds, these framings converged in legitimising the expansion of the EU border control through measures such as the hotspot approach, the reinforcement of Frontex operations, and the EU-Turkey deal.

Emotions and security in the new Pact on Migration and Asylum

Scholars have argued that emotions surface most visibly in international politics during times of crisis, when decisions are perceived as urgent and finite, and the

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[65] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Managing migration better in all aspects: A European Agenda on Migration* [online]. 12 May 2015 [viewed 25 August 2025]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_15_4956. Para. 2.

[66] Ibid., para. 3.

[67] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Speech of Vice-President Dombrovskis at the EP plenary on the EU-Turkey summit and the European Semester* [online]. 8 March 2016 [viewed 25 August 2025]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_16_701. Para. 41.

possibility of confrontation looms[68]. From this perspective, the strong emotional registers present in the Commission's discourse during the 2015 refugee crisis might be seen as an exception rather than the norm. However, the years since 2015 have shown a steady consolidation of the EU's border regime, suggesting not a temporary reaction to crisis, but a continuum in the securitisation of migration[69].

The most recent step in this trajectory is the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, formally adopted on 11 June 2024. Framed as a comprehensive reform, the Pact aims both to harmonise asylum policies across Member States and to further reinforce the EU's external borders[70]. It introduces an extensive legal and policy framework, including enhanced border surveillance, stronger cooperation with origin and transit countries, and several legislative instruments such as a common and faster asylum procedure, a crisis regulation, a reformed Eurodac system, new screening protocols, and a solidarity-based management mechanism.

Criticism of the Pact has been widespread, especially among NGOs[71]. Concerns centre on its reliance on invasive surveillance technologies for the collection, storage, and analysis of migrants' personal data. Biometric registration now extends beyond fingerprints to include facial photographs and travel history, while data retention periods have expanded from eighteen months to five years. Such measures raise the risk of discriminatory practices and unequal treatment, echoing the problematic mechanisms of the 2015 hotspot system[72]. Faster asylum procedures risk sacrificing procedural safeguards, increasing the likelihood of unjustified returns. At the same time, the Pact reinforces the EU's long-standing reliance on externalisation through partnerships with origin and transit countries, underscoring that the securitisation of migration is not confined to crisis moments but constitutes a structural feature of EU migration governance. This raises the question: if the crisis moment has passed, do

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[68] SMITH, Karen E. Emotions and EU Foreign Policy. *International Affairs*, 2021, 97(2), pp. 287-304. ISSN 0020-5850. DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiaa218. P. 292.

[69] PERKOWSKI, Nina; STIERL, Maurice; and BURRIDGE, Andrew. The Evolution of European Border Governance Through Crisis: Frontex and the Interplay of Protracted and Acute Crisis Narratives. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2023, 41(1), pp. 110-129. ISSN 0263-7758. DOI: 10.1177/02637758231152478.

[70] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Pact on Migration and Asylum* [online]. 21 May 2025 [viewed 25 August 2025]. Available from: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

[71] PICUM. *Over 50 NGOs pen eleventh-hour open letter to EU on human rights risks in Migration Pact* [online]. 18 December 2023 [viewed 20 August 2025]. Available from: https://picum.org/blog/open-letter-eu-human-rights-risks-migration-pact/

[72] DE VRIES & GUILD, 2019.

emotions still appear in the EU's justification for the Pact?

The Commission's discourses of 2023/2024 suggest they do. Despite the absence of an acute emergency, the Commission continues to draw upon fear and pity as emotional registers. The mass migration narrative remains a central trope, as exemplified by Commissioner Ylva Johansson's speech in the Med 5 Ministerial Summit on Migration, where she stated that "Several islands are under growing pressure. More than 20,000 people arrived on the Greek islands this year […] putting local communities under pressure"[73]. Likewise, President Ursula von der Leyen told the European Parliament in December 2023 that "Pressure on our external borders has continued to rise"[74].

The multiple use of the expression "pressure" evokes a quantitative burden and a looming threat, falling in the mass migration narrative in which water metaphors (pressure) play a central role. Exploring how these discursive tropes have become a consistent part of the EU's migration rhetoric, Blanc[75] argues that the use of fear in the EU's securitisation of migration has resulted in consistent "fearful practices" aimed at minimising security threats that are visible in most EU migration developments. These practices have become so engraved in the EU's border governance, that "Even when the EU attempts to revise its approach to match its own values, this reflex of closure persists, indicating that fear has been institutionalized at the EU level"[76].

On the other hand, the migrant victim narrative also remains prominent in the Commission speeches. A striking example is Commissioner Johansson's intervention at the July 2023 European Parliament Plenary Debate on Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean, where she recounts a shipwreck in the following terms:

> *The smugglers brought their victims to the trawler*
> *That was to be their tomb.*
> *Packed them like sardines. Like cattle. Like cargo.*
> *Possibly 750 people.*
> *Women and children down below.*
> *The boat drifting. Rocking. We can all imagine the panic spreading.*

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[73] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Commissioner Johansson's video message at the Med 5 Ministerial Summit on Migration* [online]. 7 October 2023 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4801. Paras. 7-8.

[74] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the review of the Spanish Presidency of the Council* [online]. 13 December 2023, [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_6585. Para. 15.

[75] BLANC, 2023.

[76] Ibid., p. 3.

In the dead of the night
The Adriana suddenly turned over and sank.
Four kilometres down into the abyss.
Dragging all within down with her.
None of the women and children survived.[77]

This passage epitomises the Commission's reliance on the language of pain to frame refugees and asylum seekers as vulnerable subjects. Refugees are cast as passive casualties ("victims…their tomb"), while the imagery of being "packed…like cargo" illustrates how they were reduced to objects, emphasizing dehumanisation. The reference to "women and children" invokes innocence and vulnerability, mobilising compassion and protective impulses. The phrase "Dragging all within down with her" conveys tragic finality, intensifying grief and pity. Such rhetoric mirrors earlier discourses, such Juncker's depiction of refugees "wading through freezing rivers" and "sleeping in the rain and mud"[78].

In Johansson's speech, migrants appear as perpetual, pitiful victims stripped of agency. They are "brought," "packed," "dragged down", never acting on their own, always subject to smuggler's cruelty. In this way, smugglers are framed as inherent villains rather than as figures emerging from the EU's restrictive border regime. Johansson reinforces this narrative when she declares: "And we must fight the smugglers, who sold people tickets not to Europe, but to their deaths"[79] Here, the shift from compassion to securitisation is explicit. "Must fight" personalises blame, deflecting attention from structural causes and positioning the EU as a protector and avenger with a moral duty to act. This securitising move culminates in: "And of course, we need an agreement on the Pact"[80], where the Pact on Migration and Asylum is legitimised as the necessary solution to both the tragedy of victimhood and the cruelty of smuggling networks.

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[77] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Commissioner Johansson's Opening Statement – European Parliament Plenary Debate on Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean* [online]. 12 July 2023 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_3822. Paras. 13-23.

[78] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Conclusions of the European Council meeting of 15 October 2015 and the Leader's Meeting on refugee flows along the Western Balkan route of 25 October 2015 – Speech by President Juncker at the European Parliament plenary session* [online]. 27 October 2015 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_5935. Para. 2.

[79] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Commissioner Johansson's Opening Statement – European Parliament Plenary Debate on Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean* [online]. 12 July 2023 [viewed 20 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_3822. Paras. 58.

[80] Ibid., para. 84.

Therefore, the new Pact on Migration and Asylum indicates that the EU's emotional alibi for the securitisation of migration is not a temporary crisis response but an enduring policy orientation. Emotions remain central to the construction of migration as a security threat: fear continues to be mobilised through the mass migration narrative, while pity and compassion are sustained through the migrant victim narrative. Together, these affective tropes reproduce the moral economy in which the reinforcement of the EU's external borders appears as both urgent and necessary, embedding emotions into the EU's migration governance beyond the 2015 refugee crisis.

Conclusion

This article has explored the role of emotions in the EU's securitisation of migration by analysing discursive practices during two moments: the 2015/2016 refugee crisis and the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2024. Through an Emotion Discourse Analysis framework, it has identified two dominant affective registers structuring the EU's framing of migration: fear, expressed through the mass migration narrative, and pity, mobilised through depictions of migrants as victims. Despite appearing contradictory, these registers have consistently operated in tandem to legitimise restrictive border and migration policies, from the expansion of Frontex's Mediterranean operations and the hotspot approach to the externalisation practices embodied in the EU-Turkey deal and, more recently, the measures outlined in the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

By tracing these affective framings across nearly a decade, the article demonstrates that the EU's reliance on emotions in its security discourse extends far beyond acute moments of crisis. Rather than being episodic or reactive, emotional tropes have become structurally embedded in the Union's migration and border governance, shaping not only how policy problems are articulated but also how extraordinary measures are legitimised and normalised. This continuity between crisis and non-crisis periods reveals that the securitisation of migration is not merely contingent on external shocks but is sustained by persistent affective patterns that underpin institutional and legal practices. In doing so, the study uncovers the emotional foundations of what scholars have long conceptualised as "Fortress Europe," suggesting that the EU's border regime is reinforced not only through formal regulations and security apparatuses but also through the ongoing circulation of

affective narratives that shape public perceptions, political priorities, and policy outcomes.

The findings reveal that the EU's migration governance is sustained not only by legal and institutional frameworks but also by complex emotional imaginaries in which fear and pity are intertwined to legitimise restrictive and extraordinary policies. By emphasising the constitutive role of emotions in the discursive construction of security threats, this study advances securitisation theory by highlighting affective registers as integral to the securitising process. In doing so, it offers a framework for understanding how emotions operate simultaneously as analytic tools and as mechanisms that co-produce security practices. Future research can build on this approach to examine other policy arenas, institutions, or geopolitical contexts, shedding light on the often-overlooked influence of emotions in shaping security agendas and broadening our understanding of the interplay between affect, power, and legitimacy in global politics.

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