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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Humanitarian Theater in the Mediterranean and the Threat of Violence in the Balkans

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the Mediterranean and the Balkan routes of migration into the European Union, exploring the (in)visibility and (un)knowability of the management of European borderlands. It offers a historical overview of the hotspot approach in the Mediterranean, where securitarian concerns merged with humanitarian affects, making certain practices and subjectivities possible, but foreclosing others. Lampedusa, Italy, has been turned into a stage where “humanitarian theater” performed for European audiences has become a crucial aspect of border management. The strategy of EU border management has been different in the Balkans, where the use of violence has been concealed with a veil of official denial. Instead of a humanitarian theater, in the Balkans we can find stories of border terror, official denial of such violence, and competing claims to knowledge about it. This official denial has kept “Europe” as a political community simultaneously implicated in and innocent of the use of violence in border management. Despite their differences, the key functions of the EU border regime have been the same in these two regions. The comparative perspective illustrates the different strategies the European border regime uses to manage the perceived “crisis” of migration, while simultaneously keeping the liberal space of Europe “safe.”

Introduction

How do we come to know what happens at the European borders? We explore this question by taking a detailed look at the so-called hotspot approach in the Mediterranean and comparing it with the management of EU borders alongside the so-called (Western) Balkan Route, one of the main migratory paths into the European Union. This article offers a historical overview of how Lampedusa, Italy, has become one of the hotspots of EU border management, an insight into how the progressive intensification of the EU border regime changed things on the island, and a reflection on the shifting and ambivalent logic of the humanitarian-securitarian nexus in its background. It also provides an overview of some of the events that have taken place on the Balkan Route since 2015, focusing on its EU-motivated closure in early 2016 and the ensuing illegal

practice of “pushback,” whereby displaced people are violently forced to leave the territory of the European Union before they can seek asylum.

We suggest that knowledge of the events around the European borders was produced differently in the case of the Mediterranean and the Balkan Route. The hotspots approach has become a location of a “humanitarian theater,” a spectacle of border play in which humanitarian and securitarian logics have not only coexisted, but ambivalently overlapped. The humanitarian theater in Lampedusa is typical of the hotspot approach, in which various actors, including humanitarian, state, and interstate agencies, religious and grassroots groups, right-wing movements, locals, and the displaced people come together in tension, taking on different roles in the humanitarian border play. The resulting form of governance both manages disaster and secures the liberal order of Europe (Pallister-Wilkins 2020).

This was seemingly different from the EU borders in the Balkans, where instead of a spectacle, we can find stories of horrific violence that remained largely unrepresented visually. EU border management in the Balkans has produced terror through brutal physical violence inflicted by border officers and the simultaneous pretense of EU state officials that such violence is not happening. Yet the purpose of this almost unrepresentable violence was the same as that of the practices in Lampedusa—it helped to simultaneously manage the “migrant crisis” at the EU borders and to maintain its liberal order seemingly intact by externalizing violence. The difference in the visibility and knowability of border management in the Mediterranean and the Balkans has to do with the ambivalent position of the Balkans in the hegemonic understanding of Europe as its internal Other: a place that needs to transform and “catch up” in order to become “properly” European (Todorova 2009; Green 2005).

This article combines reflections based on ethnographic research with a critical analysis of European border management.¹ Our critique of humanitarianism and the politics of bordering Europe is driven by the desire to imagine alternatives to humanitarian contingency and to contribute to an understanding of mobility inscribed in a context of respect, liberty and rights instead of emergency politics. Research methods included a mixture of participant observation conducted with local humanitarian groups, as well as interviews with different social actors (e.g. rescue operators, priests, political figures, artists, journalists) and activist research. Due to our positionality as citizens of the countries in which we conducted fieldwork, we chose to focus our ethnography on the “humanitarian apparatus” rather than specifically on the people on the move. It was a research choice motivated by a decision not to focus empirical research on the most vulnerable, while accepting to hear their stories when they would meaningfully emerge in the course of doing fieldwork with the humanitarians. Stories of the people on the move were collected through informal conversations conducted in passing, rather than during formal interviews. They initiated sharing them, and explicitly asked us to reiterate their message. Yet, because of the securitarian context within which both our researches were conducted, all personal information about people cited in this paper have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The making of humanitarian Lampedusa

Thousands of people have died in the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to reach Europe, and Lampedusa has seen thousands of migrants disembark in the past three decades. One

of the highest points of influx was reached in 2011, when migrants present on the island outnumbered the approximately 5,500 local residents. The largest number of migrants entering Italy was recorded in 2016 and 2017. In October 2016, for instance, 27,400 migrants reached Italy by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. In 2018, the main port of arrival for migrants was Pozzallo, a city located directly on the Mediterranean Sea in the province of Ragusa, Sicily. About 3,800 people disembarked in Pozzallo in 2018. In the same year, Lampedusa was the second most important point of disembarkation with almost 3,500 migrants arriving. In 2020, the number of migrants who arrived in Italy peaked in July at 7,100 people.² According to Mayor Salvatore Martello, 250 boats carrying 5,000 migrants arrived in Lampedusa that month.³ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered a high increase of migrants crossing the Mediterranean from 2019 to 2020,⁴ with many new arrivals coming from Tunisia. Many of the migrants who arrive in Lampedusa apply for asylum. At the national level, in 2019, about 44,000 asylum applications were registered in Italy, with asylum being denied in 81 percent of the cases, and 7 percent of migrants being assigned subsidiary protection (De Lauri 2023).⁵

Administratively, Lampedusa, together with Linosa, forms the municipality of Lampedusa and Linosa, and is part of the autonomous region of Sicily. It is located between Malta and Tunisia, 105 miles (170 km) southwest of Licata in Sicily. The island has remains of prehistoric hut foundations, Punic tombs, and Roman buildings. Over the centuries, Lampedusa has been disputed, inhabited and crossed by different populations, and used as a colony of forced domiciles as well as for military purposes.

The 1990s marked a historical shift in the history of mobility through this corner of the Mediterranean, which saw the island being seen increasingly as a transit area for asylum seekers and so-called irregular migration, defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as the “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination.”⁶

The arrival of 71 North Africans in mid-October 1992 is often considered one of the key moments when migratory trajectories through the island started to be part of larger migration flows into Europe. After a month’s stay on the island, and having been supported by the local population in the absence of indications from the authorities, a fundraiser was organized on the island to pay the migrants to travel to Porto Empedocle (Agrigento, Sicily). Several more migrant vessels disembarked in Lampedusa in the following years, and the local population was essentially left to help the migrants on its own. One of the first documented shipwrecks with loss of life is dated April 25, 1996, when a group of more than 20 Tunisians drowned due to bad weather conditions. Since then, many tragedies have been regularly reported by border authorities, journalists, activists, and humanitarian operators (De Lauri 2023).

Following an increase in migrant arrivals and consequently a shortage of proper accommodation on the island, a reception center was opened in 1998 inside the Lampedusa airport. With the introduction of administrative detention in the 1998 Turco-Napolitano Law, the reception center was turned into a detention center where people could be detained for up to thirty days. Over the next fifteen years, the official role of the center would change between “detention” and “reception,” depending on circumstances, such as the number and origin of migrants. Overcrowding in the island facility would

worsen with the 2002 Bossi-Fini Law, which extended the maximum length of detention to sixty days. Furthermore, the government of Silvio Berlusconi pushed the transition from a volunteer-run center to one managed by paid officials. Migration on the island literally became a business, with flows of public funds “to sustain the infrastructure, which in turn spawned a number of local satellite economies as well as a drastic rise in military and police personnel on the island” (Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015, 432).

As Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero remind us, most migrants disembarking after 2002 did not arrive on the island of their own preference or by chance, but rather were made to disembark at Lampedusa. Patrolling the Mediterranean Sea now meant intercepting migrant boats up to 100 miles from Lampedusa and diverting them toward the island, where reception structures were in place. It is in this historical moment that Lampedusa became a strategic site for deportations to North Africa as well as an operational, regional base for supranational organizations such as the UNHCR and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the EU agency established in 2005 to handle external border security (Andrijašević 2006; Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015).

Fluctuations in the number of migrant arrivals in Lampedusa have followed the different types of border regimes. In 2007, a new, bigger migrant center was built in the inner valley of Contrada Imbriacola. In violation of the principle of nonrefoulement,⁷ after 2008, the Italian government made Lampedusa a hub for Italy’s pushback practices by intercepting potential asylum seekers at sea and immediately returning them to Libya (Andrijašević 2006; Bialasiewicz 2012). Lampedusa saw a rise in the number of disembarkations in 2011, amid the Tunisian Revolution and the Libyan Civil War, and following the decline in border patrols in the Mediterranean (Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015). In October 2013, fifteen days after the tragedy of October 3, the Italian government launched Operation Mare Nostrum “as a military and humanitarian operation aimed at tackling the humanitarian emergency in the Strait of Sicily, due to the dramatic increase in migration flows.”⁸ The IOM praised “the heroic work of Italy’s maritime forces in rescuing at sea thousands of migrants seeking safety in Europe,”⁹ and the Operation was concluded on October 31, 2014. Soon thereafter, Frontex launched Operation Triton, with a stronger emphasis on border control and surveillance, although claiming that search and rescue would also remain a priority.¹⁰ Triton, which ended in 2018, consolidated the progressive merging of border militarization with humanitarianism, best encapsulated in the hotspot approach implemented in Italy and Greece, which also increased bio-control over migrant populations via “registration, identification, fingerprinting and debriefing of asylum seekers, as well as return operations.”¹¹ Tazzioli and Garelli (2020) emphasize that the term “hotspot” was part of the EU lexicon before it became part of the 2015 European Migration Agenda. For instance, the term has been used for mapping critical border sites, including areas of interest for security, military, and humanitarian reasons. In the early 2000s, the EU introduced the term “hotspots” (for example “logistical hotspots”) in the policy arena to address issues of crime and disasters. In regard to migration, the categorization of “smuggling hotspots” was introduced in relation to “illegal migration” and smuggling (Tazzioli and Garelli 2020, 1013–1014). The post-2015 hotspot approach developed as an idea about policies to control Mediterranean migration flows, becoming a system of Europeanized administrative and legal practices and a set of physical infrastructures including camps, centers, and offices to manage and process arrivals (De Lauri 2023; Vradis et al. 2018; Pallister-Wilkins

2020). Essentially, by “forcing individuals entering irregularly into the EU to request asylum at the frontline member states where they arrive, the hotspot hinders onward movement by means of institutionalising mobility” (Papoutsis et al. 2018, 3).

Rescue, control, and containment in Lampedusa

In Italy, the hotspot approach, established in 2015, starts at disembarkation and ends in a Center of Extraordinary Reception (Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria or CAS). Disembarkation procedures and spaces of first reception are fully securitized, and migrants are immediately detained. In Lampedusa, there is now no civilian access to disembarkation, while migrants are prohibited from using accommodation outside the hotspot center. These activities are referred to in Italian law as “prima accoglienza” (“first reception”), rather than as border regime procedures. In this way, border control is downplayed, and the idea is projected of a humanitarian system aimed at protection, with interdiction as a necessity to save lives (Debono 2019), and deportation and containment-isolation as security measures. Containment should not be read here as antithetical to mobility. Rather, it is a way to govern migration “by disrupting, decelerating and diverting migrants’ autonomous movements and by hampering migrants’ presence in certain spaces.” Therefore, while containment can be enforced via confinement and detention, containment on the border is also “enacted by keeping migrants on the move” (Tazzioli and Garelli 2020, 1011).

As Lampedusa became ingrained into the broader European rejection and containment system, different public narratives, from xenophobic positions to active solidarity, were mobilized in the framework of a “crisis of borders,” which ideologically and politically justified the affirmation of humanitarian borders as zones where practices of aid and rescue have merged with policing and rejection, always at the cost of migrants’ safety.

Contemporary humanitarianism is often described as a force that, in the name of an endangered humanity, transcends the walled space of both national and international systems. However, it would be misleading to draw any simple equation between humanitarian projects and the logic of deterritorialization (Walters 2010). While humanitarian interventions might stress certain norms of statehood, the exercise of humanitarian power is intrinsically connected to the production of new spaces. By redefining certain territories as “humanitarian zones” (as implicit in the hotspot approach), humanitarianism actualizes a new geography of spaces, which materializes in various situations—in conflict areas, in regions affected by famine, in the context of failed or fragile states, or in situations where the actual borders of states and gateways to national territories become zones of humanitarian government (Walters 2010, 139). In Europe, the multiplication of border barriers, detention centers and shelters on the one hand, and the intensification of border patrols, maritime control, and deportations on the other, signal a progressive humanitarianization of European borders as zones affected by severe crisis. In this historical context, Lampedusa has come to be associated with tragedy and emergency, and as a gateway for terrorist threats to Europe (De Lauri 2023).¹²

Traditionally, border control has been implemented with the mandate of maintaining state sovereignty over exclusive territorial spaces through the regulation of who and what can move across state borders—that is, into and out of exclusive state territory. To this aim, border control has authorized practices that range from violence, also embodied in

the restriction and denial of movement, to the threat physical force, embodied in the work of the border police (Pallister-Wilkins 2017). With the rise of humanitarian borders and the consolidation of the hotspot approach, the politics of bordering have increasingly overlapped with practices of containment, confinement, and rejection, with the last often narrated through the rhetoric of helping refugees and migrants in their “home countries.” Consequently, the externalization of European borders and policies of rejection have been framed as actions of compassionate control and a response to crisis and insecurity. Patrolling coasts, expanding the reach of immigrant reception centers, and fencing territories have thus become humanitarian reactions to migrant and refugee emergencies and, by extension, to border crises. Despite the diversity of geographical, historical, and cultural contexts characterizing today’s humanitarian borders globally, it is possible to discern the emergence of a transnational discourse of compassionate border security that fuses the humanitarian impetus with policing and militarization, reshaping traditional territorially based understandings of borders (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017). Once transformed into a humanitarian crisis, the violence on the borders does not appear as an instrument of exclusion, but rather as a response to an emergency. Indeed, the “hotspot approach is the European Commission’s response to this crisis: a tool that allows the authorities to declare whole regions, or even entire nation-states, under emergency” (Vradis et al. 2018, 4). The exacerbation of security and control, therefore, becomes acceptable and legitimate in the public discourse through its humanitarian reconfiguration (De Lauri 2023).

This dimension of the hotspot approach generates mixed emotions and ideas among migrants who arrive in Lampedusa. The hotspot center is located in a remote part of the island (considering the relatively small dimensions of Lampedusa). While migrants are expected to stay in the hotspot and are not allowed to leave it, in practice, many of them like to spend their time in the proximity of the harbor, where most of the local population lives and where there are cafés, restaurants, shops, and tourists. Several migrants can be found asking for a few euros to buy cigarettes or something to eat.

Ali is a Tunisian man who was on the boat that capsized on October 7, 2019. Antonio De Lauri had two long conversations with him on October 10 and 11.

I don’t like to eat at the center. When I eat there, I sleep all afternoon. I feel like an animal in a zoo (...) My brother lived two years in Turin. Now he is in France. I want to join him. In Tunisia, there’s no job for me. I’m 21, but Tunisia is not good for young people. Police is very harsh. If you do something wrong, they beat you badly, they don’t just arrest you. I want to join my brother, but if I cannot make a good life there, I will go somewhere else. I was in Italy for 10 months in 2018, then I was deported. (...) The trip is always dangerous. I am a good swimmer, but most of the Africans [he is referring to the people from sub-Saharan Africa, mostly women, who were with him] on the boat couldn’t swim. They went down as soon as the boat capsized. I knew there was an infant on board. So bad. The police [the Coast Guard] helped some of them in the water. It happens always. When people on the boat see the police, they all move to one side of the boat. (...) I have to wait in the center for I don’t know how long now. Maybe they will transfer me tomorrow. Maybe next week, I don’t know. Italians are good people, but why do they put us in the [hotspot] center? I’m not a criminal.

During an informal conversation, a *finanziere* (an officer of Guardia di Finanza, a militarized police force under the authority of the Ministry of Economy and Finance) with many years of experience in rescue operations told Antonio: “Sometimes the situation can be emotionally overwhelming. In all these years of work, I’ve seen everything.”

Indeed, “I’ve seen everything” is a recurrent expression among people who have been engaged in difficult rescue operations, an expression that somehow condenses the mix of the brutality that characterizes the border regime and, at the same time, the profound humanity that emerges in that context. To be sure, the multilevel humanitarian response to such crises does not implement or support violent means of control per se. That is to say, NGOs and the national and international volunteers who participate in rescue operations in the Mediterranean and Lampedusa do not by any means support the politics of violent borders. On the contrary, they often argue for open borders. On the other side, Frontex and national governments continue to criminalize both rescuers and border crossers (Cusumano and Villa 2021; De Giorgi 2010; Franko 2021). This political tension that interacts with aspects of sovereignty, identity, and economy is a structuring principle of the forces of contingency that eventually turn border violence into a *zone of protection*. The violent control at the borders becomes acceptable only because of the emergency that necessitates an extraordinary, humanitarian response. The situation was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified border patrols (De Lauri 2023).

At the Mediterranean borders, we see today two apparently different narratives and forms of action: state policing, control and rejection on the one hand, and rescue and assistance provided by state actors, humanitarian organizations and grassroots initiatives on the other. What has been called the “Black Mediterranean” to describe the history of racial subordination in the Mediterranean region pushes us to situate the contemporary migrant and refugee reception crisis in the context of Europe’s history of empire, colonialism and slavery (Danewid 2017, 1679), thus reconnecting the narrative of crisis with the construction of a specifically European form of border governance.

Again, we reiterate the need to distinguish between different actors and activism—especially to avoid blaming all humanitarians for contributing to exclusion and death along the borders. Clearly, there are different moralities and ideologies produced by the state (or Frontex), humanitarian organizations or activists. At the same time, border policing and rescue belong to the same episteme to the extent that they take place through a humanitarian logic governed by exceptionalism and emergency. It is in the framework of this contingent geography of crisis that regimes of protection are affirmed and freedom of movement is dismantled.

Lampedusa’s humanitarian border reflects the political and conceptual shift away from legal borders and portrays policing operations as articulations of a politics of compassion and repatriation. The merging of humanitarian search-and-rescue operations with state-sovereign performances on European borders is the counterpoint to the complex architecture of confinement in the Middle East and Africa—hence the slogan “helping migrants where they are.”¹³ Traditionally, humanitarian confinement has taken the form of camps (Agier 2011; Campesi 2015). With the humanitarian border, confinement becomes extendable both geographically (from the hotspot center to the island, to a region) and conceptually (“stay home”). Rejection and restraint, in this perspective, mutually serve the main rhetoric of keeping migrants and refugees in their “home countries” while reframing the geographical substance and political extension of borders (De Lauri 2019 and 2023).

Ines, a Tunisian woman in her early twenties whom Antonio met in Lampedusa, said:

People ask me “why did you come to Italy? Don’t you see we have many problems here too? Don’t you see we don’t have jobs?” But everyone looks for a better life. I don’t understand

why they say “stay in Tunisia.” If we leave, it means we need to do that. Don’t they think I would prefer to take a plane instead of a boat? So, when they ask me “why did you come here if you can’t” I reply “But why can you travel to Tunisia whenever you want and I can’t do the same here?” (...) Some of us become too sad and lose hope. (...) If we were allowed to travel in a normal way, we wouldn’t risk dying in the sea. People should think better before saying “stay home.”

The dichotomy between migrants “who really need help” and those who “should stay in their home country” is intrinsic to the scrutinizing mechanism of the hotspot approach, and many political leaders use such a categorization to distinguish between deserving migrants and undeserving others (De Lauri 2023).¹⁴

The theatricalization of humanitarian crisis

A multitude of tragic micro-stories creates a historical macro-narrative of suffering as a consequence of border policies. But why does this narrative not translate into massive political and legal action? We believe part of the answer lies in the humanitarian discourse, which channels this suffering in a way that generates humanitarian compassion rather than political action.

Of course, this process started long before the hotspot approach, but it found momentum in 2015 when the rhetoric of Europe facing “disproportionate migratory pressures” started to grow significantly. In fact, the hotspot approach is defined as an

approach where the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), Europol and Eurojust work on the ground with the authorities of frontline EU Member States which are facing disproportionate migratory pressures at the EU’s external borders to help to fulfill their obligations under EU law and swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants.¹⁵

Lampedusa itself is now a sort of large memorial of the Mediterranean migratory tragedy. In June 2008, “Porta di Lampedusa – Gate of Europe” was inaugurated in Lampedusa. It is a work of art by Mimmo Paladino dedicated to the migrants who died or were lost at sea. In July 2013, Pope Francis made his first apostolic journey to Lampedusa on the theme of welcoming migrants. Over the years, different sites on the island have been transformed into open museums, where boats used by migrants to reach Lampedusa were exposed as living memories of their tragic journey.

A historical archive on the island has served in the past few years as a location for events connected to migration as well as photo exhibitions and book launches by academics and journalists who have written about migration. An alternative museum and archive of Lampedusa, Porto M, has been created with fragments of migrants’ boats and their lost belongings.¹⁶ A number of films, documentaries, songs, and theatrical performances have focused on the recent history of Lampedusa as an emblematic site of contemporary migration and the “migration crisis.”¹⁷ In this context, crisis and death at sea have become hot topics for many artists.¹⁸ Pietro Bartolo, a former medical doctor from Lampedusa, who for many years took care of residents as well as migrants on the island, is now a member of the European Parliament, where he continues to speak out against the practices of migrant reception and deaths at sea. In parallel, the number of researchers who have written about Lampedusa has grown significantly in the past few years (De Lauri 2023).

All this shows that Lampedusa is not a forgotten place in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, nor is it the case that debates about migration through the island are relegated to an academic niche. On the contrary, Lampedusa is high on the agenda of mainstream media, public debates, and expert knowledge. And yet, it is the configuration and theatricalization of a “humanitarian Lampedusa” that enables forces of contingency rather than more radical forms of political action. Our use of the notion of theatricalization refers to a form of systematic dramatization of migration flows and builds on a body of research that has highlighted key aspects of the border spectacle with its performances and effects (De Genova 2013 and 2019; Mazzara 2019; van Reekum 2016). Theatricalization thus includes the way “migrants and the once (stereotypically) idyllic island of Lampedusa have been discursively re-constructed, across the European public sphere, as subjects and spaces of abjection, waste, expendability, and, according to the occasion, empathetic scopic consumption” (De Michelis 2017, 1–2). Cuttitta (2014) refers to Italian immigration control policies as a “political spectacle,” whereby Lampedusa becomes the theater of the “border play.” Cuttitta reiterates that the number of migrants entering Italy irregularly by sea represents a small percentage of the total of those residing in Italy (and Europe). The majority of undocumented residents consists either of migrants who have crossed the land borders irregularly or (to a greater extent) migrants who have entered the EU with valid visas and then overstayed. The number of undocumented migrants entering Europe by sea is significantly smaller than is generally depicted in public debates as a consequence of the common rhetoric of migrant “invasion” (Cuttitta 2014, 206; see also De Haas 2007; Fabini 2019). The number of migrants entering Europe by sea appears even smaller if put in relation to the demand for foreign workers and the millions of migrants who every year legally enter Europe through national recruitment schemes or receive legal status and permits through legalization programs. This notwithstanding, the narrative of migrants arriving by sea and those who die at sea has a much stronger impact in the media and on public opinion than does talk of overstayers and migrants entering the country illegally by land. Therefore, Cuttitta argues, “if the border, generally speaking, is a suitable theater for the ‘political spectacle,’ the sea border is the ideal stage for political actors to perform the ‘border play’” (2014, 206). Such a multi-layered spectacle involves highly politicized narrations of threat and invasion, while enabling the production, distribution, and consumption of images and stories of migrant suffering and death (Franko 2021).

Borders and borderlands have historically captured the imagination of the peoples of the world and they continue to function as a grand motif in public cultures (Wilson and Donnan 2012). When intertwined with emergency and crisis, the humanitarian border (Walters 2010; Williams 2015; Kallio, Häkli, and Pascucci 2019) gives form to a powerful imaginary where contrasting sentiments (from panic and fear to compassion and pity) and attitudes (from racism to charity) find fertile ground to grow. The theatricalization of the border crisis in Lampedusa epitomizes the hotspot approach whereby different “actors” (humanitarian actors, state and interstate agencies, religious groups and bodies, volunteers, right-wing movements, the *Lampedusani*—the people of Lampedusa—and, of course, the migrants) are defined by their very existence and role *in* the border/humanitarian theater. A major effect of the theatricalization is constraining the broad arsenal of initiatives, activism, knowledge, and arts about “irregular migration” through/in Lampedusa within the spectacle of crisis. In this way, even criticism of existing migration policies develops in

continuity with the consolidation of the humanitarian border and, ultimately (though often unintentionally), the hotspot approach (De Lauri 2023).

The threat of violence instead of a humanitarian theater: comparison with the Balkan route

EU borders in the Balkans have not become the location of a “humanitarian theater” because the violence inflicted upon the displaced people there is formally illegal and, therefore, impossible to represent as a part of an official EU border policy. More displaced people have tried to reach the EU via the Balkan Route than via the Italian part of the Mediterranean: according to Frontex, there were 130,325 recorded crossings in 2016, and 60,541 in 2021.¹⁹ Yet, instead of a “humanitarian theater” that ambivalently merges humanitarian and securitarian logics, in the Balkans we find a threat of violence. Management of EU borders in the Balkans produces terror both through brutal physical violence and through an official pretense that such violence is not actually happening. As Davies, Isakjee, and Obradovic-Wochnik (2022, 1) argue, state authorities along the Balkan Route regularly use epistemic borderwork “to silence unwanted voices, undermine insurgent perspectives, and stifle the capacity of refugees to draw attention to their own mistreatment.” Various activists have been documenting and publishing the testimonies of migrants who suffered brutal border violence, in an attempt to generate knowledge that would counter the state silencing (Davies, Isakjee, and Obradovic-Wochnik 2022). Theatricalization has not taken place on the Balkan Route due to the existence of multiple and competing knowledge claims as to what is actually going on at the EU border crossings in the Balkans.

The sea border provides an ideal stage for theatricalization because it is easier there than at a land border to diffuse responsibility for the suffering and death of migrants, as we can see from a comparison of Lampedusa and the Balkan Route. Deaths at sea are conventionally framed as “accidents” caused by “misfortune,” even when the responsible officials know full well in advance what the outcome of their inaction would be. Uncertainties over the division of responsibilities at a sea border mean that there is no need to inflict violence directly and that cruelty can take the form of inaction: Deciding to take a “day off” can effectively mean leaving the migrants to die at sea, as the transcripts of conversations between Italian officials and Libyan coastguard indicate.²⁰ Furthermore, the violence of the hotspot itself is hidden within the structure of the humanitarian theater, for instance in draining administrative procedures or in the systematic rejection of family reunification cases.

The violence of borders is enacted and manifested in different ways. Along the Balkan Route, we come across stories of physical and symbolic violence inflicted upon people on the move that are denied or ignored by the Balkan states. The Balkan Route has a long history (Hess and Kasperek 2021); today it refers to a path used by displaced people to get from Turkey and Greece to Austria, Germany, or other countries in the EU. Since 2016, humanitarian organizations helping displaced people on the Balkan Route have been continuously reporting that illegal pushbacks take place at the EU borders, where border police illegally return the migrants across the border to a non-EU country, denying them access to asylum. The cases of illegal violence have been documented so well by civil society activists and volunteers that there is no doubt about their being

real.²¹ The border between Croatia (EU member) and Bosnia and Herzegovina has without a doubt become the site of physical abuse, harassment, humiliation, extortion, and destruction of property of the migrants.²² Yet, the official accounts of state representatives continually refuse to admit the fact that the illegal violent pushbacks are taking place. The border violence in the Balkans has not been turned into a part of the overall “crisis” response, as in the hotspots approach in the Mediterranean. The only public admission of violence at the EU borders in the Balkans happened in July 2019, when then-president of Croatia Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović told a Swiss TV station that the Croatian border police “uses a little bit of force” to push refugees and migrants back to Bosnia and Herzegovina.²³ This statement was met with strong disapproval from various actors, including Human Rights Watch, UNHCR, and the Council of Europe.²⁴ Since responsibility for the violence and suffering committed on the EU borders alongside the Balkan Route is much less fluid than on a sea border, this is not as convenient of a stage for the border play as the Mediterranean Sea. Instead of tragic images of dead bodies, it is stories of horrific violence and suffering that circulate from the land borders along the Balkan Route. These stories are coated in uncertainty, suspicion, and official denial. If the Mediterranean provides an ideal stage for a border play directed at a European audience, the stories of (visually rarely represented) violence that circulate from the land borders of the Balkan Route play a different role in the management of migration in the European border regime: Our empirical research in Podgorica, Montenegro, confirms that these stories spread fear among women migrants and scare some of them into going back or never attempting to take the Balkan Route in the first place. The case in point is Sadiya, a 34-year-old woman from Iran who embarked upon the Balkan Route in 2018 aiming to enter the EU. However, the messages she received that described the violence one of her acquaintances suffered at the Bosnian-Croatian border made her decide to linger in Montenegro longer than she expected. She ended up living on the outskirts of Podgorica for four years, in precarity and uncertainty. Sadiya waited for stories about the border violence to tone down, or for an opportunity for a safer entry to present itself, to continue her journey towards the EU (see also Jovanović, Mitrović, and Erdei 2023). She decided to try her luck with the EU border crossing only once her personal situation changed drastically—Sadiya got pregnant, decided to get an abortion, and separated from her partner. She managed to get to Western Europe, but then due to a legal obstacle, decided to go back to Iran.

There was a short period during which the Balkan Route was the center of a visual spectacle too, albeit of a different kind. This occurred in 2015 and early 2016, when the Balkan Route was open, meaning that displaced people were allowed to travel freely all the way up to their desired destinations in the European Union, such as Austria or Germany (Hameršak et al. 2020). There were no stories of violence and beatings repeated in half voice at that time. Instead, the images that circulated represented Europeans assisting and welcoming the migrants on their path to new homes (Cantat 2020; El Shaarawi and Razsa 2019), and even police officers helping migrant children (film by Želimir Žilnik “Logbook Srbistan”). It seemed as if migrants’ pain and difficulties were met more often than not with empathy and support from state authorities as well as civil society through the frameworks of everyday humanitarianism, “*Willkommenskultur*,” and/or solidary politics. Critical migration scholarship complicated this picture, demonstrating that the Balkan Route/corridor at this period had a clear securitarian-

humanitarian character (Bužinkić and Hameršak 2018; Hameršak and Pleše 2021; Beznec, Speer, and Mitrović 2016). Nevertheless, the dominant visual politics of representation in this short period transformed the Balkans into a stage where European citizenship was claimed through images of solidarity, openness, and inclusiveness, erasing differences between the “East” and the “West” (Greenberg and Spasić 2017; Sandberg and Andersen 2020).

This drastically changed in March 2016, when the Balkan Route was closed due to pressure from the Austrian and Slovenian governments (Bužinkić and Hameršak 2018). Shortly after Sebastian Kurz, then-chief of Austrian diplomacy, visited the leaders of the Western Balkan countries,²⁵ their borders were closed, the refugees and migrants were prevented from freely crossing the EU borders, and the reports of police beatings started spreading regularly. As Mitrović and Vilenica (2019) argue, the “Balkan Route” was transformed into a buffer zone of the EU, an “external borderscape” where the movement of migrants is constricted and redirected in a circular fashion—from one Western Balkan refugee camp or country to another, and back, always away from the EU (see also Leutloff-Grandits 2023). In our view, the fact that violence on the Balkan Route remains invisible to a great extent—it is very much talked about, but officially denied and extremely rarely visually documented by activists—plays a double role. This lack of exposure of the violence on the Balkan Route provides a layer of protection to the state and border authorities responsible for inflicting it; it also extends a sense of fear and terror among the people on the move through the work of imagination.

Different forms of action and knowledge

Since 2015, a growing body of research has focused on grassroots responses to mass migration, the role of volunteers, and activism throughout Europe, including in the Balkans and Lampedusa (Brković, De Lauri, and Hess 2021; Feischmidt, Pries, and Cantat 2018; McGee and Pelham 2018; Rozakou 2020; Sandri 2017; Stierl 2018). This literature has emphasized important aspects of the broad migration-receiving apparatus, which includes not only institutional means and structures, but also networks, spontaneous movements, and associations, which draw from different political vocabularies and philosophies, spanning a wide range from assimilation to prefigurative politics and decolonized solidarity. However, we should not forget that these bottom-up responses to migration are always confronted by and often integrated into a larger humanitarian framework that absorbs a plurality of experiences, ideas, and elements ranging from militarization and illegal violence to civic engagement. Humanitarian categories then become political tools. In a European context that oscillates between spectacle and denial, the distinction between “economic” and “forced” migration is used by governments as a way to criminalize migrants entering Europe through channels other than the Mediterranean, capitalizing on media’s overexposure of those migrants arriving by sea (who represent only a small part of the overall migration towards Europe) (Sciurba 2017). Both solidarity and xenophobia emerge from borderlands as the effect of “crisis.”

This is also reflected in the way the so-called crisis of migration has come to be seen both by the residents of Lampedusa and by many in the Balkans. Shifting from a period of diffused solidarity when the islanders were involved in providing assistance to a form of

alienation in the humanitarian apparatus, many in Lampedusa believe they have been abandoned: “We have been abandoned by the state, by our institutions, and of course by Europe” the owner of a café in Lampedusa told Antonio, echoing the thoughts of many others.²⁶ As a consequence, political tensions grow: In June 2020, migrant boats in one of the sites on the island were set on fire.²⁷

A similar shift in sentiments among the locals can be noted in the Balkans. While the Balkan corridor was open, grassroots forms of support mushroomed throughout the Balkan Route, accompanied by various articulations of humanitarian affect (Milan 2019); however, the closure of the Balkan Route created a sense of being turned into a “dumping ground” both by Europe and by the local political elites among the residents of Bihać, a Bosnian town on the border with the EU (Croatia), as Hromadžić (2020) notes. Helms (2023) notices that this shift has produced new kinds of social boundaries among the local population of Bihać.

The narratives of crisis and emergency cut across the different forms of action and knowledge produced on the recent history of Lampedusa and, more broadly, on migration across the Mediterranean and the Balkans (see Hess 2012). Indeed, the contemporary humanitarian machinery constitutes a coherent, ideological framework that integrates different elements such as the arts, academic work, celebrity performances, solidarity, activism, diplomacy, private interests, police, and military force into a single “modern redemptory attitude that is expressed in forms of compassion and government” (De Lauri 2020: XV). The making of the humanitarian border and the hotspot approach thus involves a vast, articulated, evolving, and multiscale mesh of different actors, stories, politics, and structures that confirm the historical persistence of a modern salvation philosophy (De Lauri 2020) as the logical response to mass migration.

Youssef is 29. In Tunisia, he used to work as an electrician. He was on the same boat as Ali. While in Lampedusa, he used to spend as much time as he could outside the hotspot center. Antonio often met him in front of the main church. Once he told Antonio:

Sometimes I feel people can't see me. Either they say bad things about me or my friends or family or my country, or they say “you poor people.” I say I want to stay in Europe to look for a job. I think I want to go to Germany. I want to work and have a family. I am good at doing my job. Look at my hands, these are the hands of a strong worker [he laughs]. I can do many jobs. (...) We sit here in front of the church with nothing to do, our days are very boring. I like to do things. I know everything is not perfect in Italy too. Italians go to other places too. We travel; we are travelers, right?

The historical narrative produced by discourses of humanitarian crises transforms migrants' subjectivity into the mere expression of their basic needs (“people can't see me”). When not considered as social threats (e.g. “irregular” or “illegal” migrants, or potential terrorists), border crossers are depicted as voiceless victims, therefore reinforcing the spectacle of suffering in the current governance of mobility. At the same time, the narrative of crisis fosters the criminalization of activities that rely on universally accepted codes of ethics, such as rescuing someone at sea. This was clear also in the words of Salvatore, a fisherman in Lampedusa:

When we prepare to go out for fishing, we pray to God not to find bodies in the water. It's so heartbreaking. And you know, if we find bodies and we bring them to Lampedusa, then the authorities confiscate my boat for a period, therefore we cannot work. It's even worse if by

chance we need to rescue someone. I've seen people almost falling into disgrace because the boat was confiscated for a long period (...). The problem with many people arriving in Lampedusa is not new, as you know. But before it was different for us. In Lampedusa, we are sea people. It's normal for us to rescue people in trouble at sea. Before, you know, if we helped someone from Tunisia or from any place, we did the normal things you do when you help someone. We offered a warm cup of tea, a blanket. It was normal. You ask "what's your name?" "Where are you from?" Now there is Guardia Costiera, Guardia di Finanza, Carabinieri, and also Sea Watch [a non-profit organization], and all the others. It's a big circus. They say irregular migrants, irregular migrants. The newspapers say thousands of irregular migrants in Lampedusa. We are in the middle of it. But now we can no longer offer a cup of tea, we can no longer ask for a name. We feel useless, and at the same time, we pay for it. Politicians say there is a big problem, but they do nothing to solve it.

Salvatore's words can be an illustration of how humanitarianism has the power to reconfigure contemporary morality to the point of reinforcing criminalization and legitimizing forms of violence through neglect. The theatricalization of humanitarian crises on borders creates a constant nexus between human suffering and the need for humanitarian exceptionalism. This enabled exceptionalism in managing borders translates into exaggerated security practices and consolidates the hierarchicalization of borders as something "natural"—thus normalizing the political and social scrutiny of those who can and those who cannot cross a border. This, in turn, makes possible mediatic spectacles around stories of NGOs' rescue boats that have to wait days before national authorities allow them to enter a harbor and disembark migrants. The humanitarian border transforms border crossers into humanitarian subjects, igniting forms of moral compassion that however do not last,²⁸ and do not translate into long-term legal and political action. Since 2015, the invocation of tragedy, and thus the question of crisis, has served as an ordering principle to reinforce the fortification of various forms of border policing (De Genova 2017). One main feature of such a strategy is the polarization between "irregular migrants" and innocent victims. In this context, policing (to reject "irregular migrants") and piety (to help victims), violence (deportation, confinement) and promise (help "them" at "home" and welcome those "who are really in need") become components of a humanitarian framework that is founded in crisis itself (De Lauri 2019 and 2023).

In the Balkans, the management of displacement has been framed as a "migrant crisis." Instead of a humanitarian spectacle prepared for the European audiences, surveillance and securitization of the EU border regime have contributed to the strengthening of the differences between "European Muslims" and "Arab Others" (Rexhepi 2018). While European border policies are nominally presented as colorblind and equal to all, their implementation in the Balkans has been premised upon racialized and religious categories that were mobilized to differentiate the "migrant crisis" from "normal times," and "danger" from "safety" (see Whitley 2017).

Conclusion

A comparative ethnographic perspective on EU border management in different areas, such as the one we provide in this article, has analytical advantages. It can help to differentiate what is shared in the management of European borders from what simply reflects regional particularities. Both the Mediterranean and the Balkans are part of the same

story of the EU border regime, yet so many things seem different at first sight. Teasing out the differences and similarities helps us to focus on the underlying processes of EU bordering practices and to abandon the lens of the “exception” or “crisis” when analyzing them.

In the article, issues of (in)visibility and (un)knowability of the management of European borders are located in a context of humanitarian efforts and narratives that make certain practices and subjectivities possible, but foreclosing others. Lampedusa has been turned into a stage where “humanitarian theater” performed for European audiences has become a crucial aspect of border management. The strategy has been different in the Balkans, where the use of violence in border management has been covered with a veil of official denial. This has kept “Europe” as a political community simultaneously implicated in and innocent of the use of illegal border violence. Instead of a humanitarian theater, in the Balkans we can find stories of border terror, one of whose social effects has been to dissuade displaced people from taking the Balkan Route to the EU.

Yet, despite the differences, the key functions of the EU border regime have been the same in these two locations. The comparative perspective has helped us to demonstrate that different strategies of the European border regime manage the perceived “crisis” of migration, while simultaneously keeping the liberal space of Europe “safe,” in different senses of this term.

Notes

1. Antonio De Lauri conducted field research in Lampedusa in 2019; Carna Brkovic conducted field research in Podgorica, Montenegro, in 2019. Both authors would like to thank the reviewers and the editors for constructive feedback on earlier versions of the manuscript. De Lauri acknowledges support from the Research Council of Norway (FRIHUMSAM 288398). Part of the material presented in this article was also included in De Lauri, A. (2023) “Humanitarian Lampedusa and the Theatralization of Crisis.” In *Continental Encampment: Genealogies of Humanitarian Containment in the Middle East and Europe*, edited by Are Knudsen and Kjersti Berg, 216–236. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
2. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/765537/number-of-migrants-landed-in-italy/>
3. <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/26401/lampedusa-runs-out-of-room-to-quarantine-new-migrants-as-politicians-start-to-blame-each-other>
4. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>
5. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/765537/number-of-migrants-landed-in-italy/>
6. <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>. Although widely used in both scholarly and public fora, the term “irregular migration” essentializes the status of migrants and consequently to some extent legitimizes states’ adoption of expulsion and detention measures as well as criminalization approaches. In the context of Italian law, a *clandestino* or “illegal migrant” is an individual who is present on Italian territory without the relevant travel documentation or a residence/work permit. The large majority of persons subject to removal are “irregular,” having overstayed valid residence permits (Coluccello and Massey 2007).
7. Nonrefoulement is a key principle of international law that forbids a country receiving asylum seekers from returning them to a country in which they are likely to be in danger. “The prohibition of *refoulement* under international human rights law applies to any form of removal or transfer of persons, regardless of their status, where there are substantial grounds for believing that the returnee would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return on account of torture, ill-treatment or other serious breaches of human rights

- obligations.” <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>
8. <https://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum.aspx>
 9. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/iom-applauds-italy%E2%80%99s-life-saving-mare-nostrum-operation-%E2%80%9Cnot-migrant-pull-factor%E2%80%9D>
 10. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/focus/joint-operation-triton-italy--ekKaes>
 11. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_hotspots_en.pdf
 12. This was recently the case with the attack that occurred in Nice on October 29, 2020, when three persons were killed by a 21-year-old Tunisian man. As political reactions in France and around Europe grew after what was described as another Islamist terrorist attack, the debate in Italy also pointed at the fact that the man had reached Europe via Lampedusa, then transferred to Bari; https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/il-terrorista-di-nizza-e-passato-da-lampedusa-salvini-lamorgese-si-dimetta_it_5f9af6fbc5b6aab57a104c9d
 13. <https://www.ildubbio.news/2019/08/17/alfonso-giordano-aiutare-i-migranti-a-casa-loro-basta-non-aiutare-i-dittatori/> ; <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/migranti-perche-retorica-bisogna-aiutarli-casa-loro-non-serve-contrastare-flussi-AEKyNCRF>
 14. For related discussions on the link between the idea of “deserving migrants” and media representation, see for example: Jones (2017); Rosen and Crafter (2018); Vollmer and Karakayali (2018).
 15. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/hotspot-approach_en
 16. For more info see <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/con-gli-oggetti/porto-m/>; see also Kushner (2016).
 17. See, for example, the play *Appunti per un naufragio* (Notes for a Shipwreck) by Davide Enia, based on his book (Enia 2017). Some of these cultural productions reached large audiences, as was the case with *Terraferma*, a 2011 film directed by Emanuele Crialesi that premiered at the 68th Venice International Film Festival (it won the Special Jury Prize), and the 2016 documentary *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea) directed by Gianfranco Rosi, which won the Golden Bear at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 89th Academy Awards.
 18. See Ramsay (2016) for a problematization of this aspect from the perspective of an artist.
 19. Great fluctuations of the recorded number of crossings between 2015 and 2020 are likely the result of the closure of the Balkan Route and the fear caused by the illegal border violence. <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>
 20. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/16/wiretaps-migrant-boats-italy-libya-coast-guard-mediterranean?fbclid=IwAR3efuEkAZgDvIWl3ljbQftd2QL0SA1tdr8hAV--SQeAf3VMPHnwTEXieA>
 21. See, for instance <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-route-shifts-but-pushbacks-continue-croatian-schengen-accession-approved-amid-mounting-reports-of-violations-and-confusion-over-independent-border-monitoring-report/>, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/31/croatian-police-accused-of-robbing-and-pushing-back-to-bosnia-afghans>
 22. <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-route-shifts-but-pushbacks-continue-croatian-schengen-accession-approved-amid-mounting-reports-of-violations-and-confusion-over-independent-border-monitoring-report/> ; See also <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/23/croatia-denies-migrant-border-attacks-after-new-reports-of-brutal-pushbacks>
 23. <https://www.dw.com/en/in-croatia-eu-border-guards-use-a-little-bit-of-force/a-49587251>
 24. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/15/croatia-president-admits-unlawful-migrant-pushbacks>
 25. Newspapers reports on Sebastian Kurz visiting in the second week of February 2016 Bosnia and Herzegovina: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2016/2/8/kurz-austrija-podrzava-bih-na-putu-ka-eu>, Serbia: <https://www.trt.net.tr/srpski/region-1/2016/02/09/vucic-i-kurz-dogovorili-akcioni-plan-srbije-i-austrije-za-2016-od-regionalne-saradnje-doborbe-protiv-terorizma-429519>, Montenegro: <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/118705/>

moguce-da-cg-postane-dio-migrantske-rute.html, and Macedonia: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/27548769.html>

26. For a reflection on recent dynamics of local resentment in Lampedusa, see Franceschelli (2019); see also Puggioni 2015.
27. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/sicily-launches-inquiry-into-fire-in-migrant-boats-graveyard>
28. With reference to the shipwreck of October 3, 2013, Horsti and Neumann (2017) write: “The sinking of the boat near Lampedusa turned local people into eyewitnesses, and its mediation created national, European, and global witnessing audiences. Media representations of death and survival prompted moral calls to respond. By positioning the Italian rescue agents at the center of the drama, the media invited Europeans to join the spectacle as humanitarians. However, the media’s interest in this particular incident waned quickly.”

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