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Greece's border, Europe's shield: the racial border in Evros between Europeanisation and re-nationalisation

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ABSTRACT

The Evros land border between Greece and Turkey, simultaneously a section of the European Union's external border, is a site of pushbacks and collective expulsions for many decades. Pushbacks based on racial profiling are the standard mode of border control, in direct contravention of international law and European legislation. The prevalence of these practices, despite the communitarisation of border and migration policies after the Treaty of Amsterdam, highlights the tension within the European migration and border regime between European border management rationalities on the one hand and national-sovereign logics of border control on the other. The contribution analyses sovereign infrastructures of pushbacks at the Evros border, the failed attempts to Europeanise the Evros border, and the longer history of racist policing of migration in Greece. Through this case study, it is argued that after the failure of the European mode of border management to contain the migrations of 2015/16, the European migration and border regime is defaulting back to national-sovereign modes of border control.

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At the south-eastern edge of Europe, the Evros river (Maritsa in Bulgarian and Meriç in Turkish) produces a border region between Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece. Even though the river forms a long natural borderline which is part of the European Union's external border, the region has only received periodic attention, largely driven by mediated and spectacular events. This despite its decades-long relevance for unauthorised migration towards the European Union (as well as its history as part of the Iron Curtain).

The latest such cycle: just at the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic, in late February 2020, the North-eastern Greek border region formed by the Evros prefecture burst once more into the public's attention. As Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sought to re-negotiate the terms of the so-called EU-Turkey deal (European Council 2016) and began to facilitate the movement of migrants and asylum seekers into Edirne province, adjacent to the Greek prefecture Evros, a border crisis unfolded (İşleyen and Karadağ 2023; Teunissen and Koutrolikou 2022).

As more and more migrants attempted to cross the border, the Greek government responded with an unprecedented mobilisation of border guards and the military,

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suspended the right to asylum (Amnesty International 2020; HumanRights360 2020) and forced all migrants and asylum seekers that had crossed the river back into Turkey. This was done with brutal and excessive force, leading to two known killings (Forensic Architecture 2020a, 2020b) and numerous injured migrants. It is one of the many examples of escalating border violence that have been observed for the different sections of the external border of the European Union over the last decade.

On 3 March 2020, high representatives of the European Union flocked to the small Greek border village of Kastanies (one of two official border crossing points with Turkey) to demonstrate European solidarity with Greece.¹ Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, Andrej Plenković, prime minister of Croatia and president of the Council, David Sassoli, president of the European Parliament and Charles Michel, president of the European Council met with Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. After having taken a helicopter flight together to inspect the border from above, they assembled for a joint press conference.

Commission President von der Leyen's statement was later published by the Commission, including a video recording of her delivery. In the video, we see five lecterns, with Mitsotakis in the centre and von der Leyen to his right. Mitsotakis asks 'Ursula' to speak, she thanks 'Kyriakos' for the floor and the invitation to Evros and begins to deliver her speech, barely deviating from the text later published by the Commission. Her message is one of solidarity and union: 'the Greek worries are our worries', '[t]his border is not only a Greek border but it is also a European border', 'I stand here today as a European at your side', '[w]e have come here today to send a very clear statement of European solidarity and support to Greece', and again: 'Our first priority is making sure that order is maintained at the Greek external border, which is also a European border', 'The situation at our border is not only Greece's issue to manage. It is the responsibility of Europe as a whole' (European Commission 2020; European Commission Audiovisual Service 2020).

Von der Leyen then closes her speech with the following line: 'I thank Greece for being our European *aspida* in these times'. As she delivers this last line, she turns – twice – to Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis. As she utters and mispronounces the word '*aspida*', a slight smile appears on her face. The smile, one can have the impression, has a conspiratorial air about it. As if only her and Mitsotakis were in the know what is really implied by invoking this term. And indeed, even before thanking her for her statement, Mitsotakis instructs the international journalists: 'Translate *aspida* as shield'.

In the published, English-language text of von der Leyen's statement, a translation of the term is added in square brackets. But notably, the Greek term is written in Greek letters: 'I thank Greece for being our European *ασπίδα* [English: shield] in these times' (explanatory brackets in the original). That particular line was consistently picked up in the media's reporting on the border visit (e.g. euronews 2020). Also, it consistently drew critical discursive analysis, taking it as further evidence for the EU's understanding of borders as a defensive – and thus to be securitised – mechanism against migration understood as a 'threat' (e.g. Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020). Yet apart from the semantics: what was so important about this term '*aspida*' that it had to be included, as a Greek-language term, in the speech?

Whatever the reasons for von der Leyen to include the Greek word, intentional or not: the use of the term '*aspida*' connects the massive deployment of Greek border guards and

military personnel in the border crisis of spring 2020 with a previous Greek border operation thirteen years before. In summer of 2012, the Greek government launched the national Operation Aspida. A strong contingent of Greek border guards was deployed to Evros, while asylum law was regionally securitised. Ostensibly too to stem a migration crisis, it intensified the racist pushback regime in Evros, solidifying it into a sovereign infrastructure over the following years. In this respect, it marked a counterpoint to the emergency Operation RABIT organised by the European border agency Frontex, deploying its Rapid Border Intervention Teams to Evros in the winter of 2010/11.

The two operations – while superficially sharing the same objective, i.e. to reign in irregular migration across the external border of the EU – differ substantially. As I will argue in this contribution, the difference is the product of two distinct rationalities: for one, a Europeanised approach that finds its expression in the notion of migration and border management, and for the other, a national-sovereign mode of border control. These two approaches differ not only in the underlying rationalities, but also in their relation to the racial character of Europe's borders and to racist border violence.

The argument presented in this contribution is the following. It posits that in the aftermath of the summer of migration of 2015, the European mode of *migration and border management* was partially abandoned in favour of sovereign control over national borders that had already existed previously, and that was never entirely displaced by the former during the fifteen years after the Treaty of Amsterdam. This shift threw into sharp relief the fundamentally racial character of the European border. Europeanisation had not challenged this character, but had sought to reign in explicitly racist acts through anti-discrimination, colour-blindness and fundamental rights that were baked into the foundational legislative acts of European border management. With this mode discredited, the shift from European border management to sovereign border control manifested itself in the intensification of racist border violence and state crimes against migrants and asylum seekers at multiple sections of the European external border.

If there was an event that highlighted the abandoning of the European mode in favour of a mode of sovereign control of national borders, it is the border crisis in Evros in 2020. Von der Leyen's 2020 nod to the national Operation Aspida of 2012 may be read as an acknowledgement of this new hegemony of national border policies and practices, implicitly legitimising the racist violence unleashed in Evros. It was a sign of things to come: Over the following years, not only during the Covid-19 pandemic, border violence not only increased, it also became increasingly normalised at the European external border. That the Commission showed increasing deference to these new old ways of doing border in Europe, even when they were in clear breach of European and international law, contributed greatly to the normalisation of these violent state practices.

The case of the Evros border is also instructive for a second reason: The Europeanisation of national borders over the last three decades was a slow-moving process that was not only never completed, it was also characterised by recurring crises. To this end, the ideal types of European border management and national border control might be gleaned from policy and legislative documents, but they were never implemented in such clarity. Rather, in specific border zones, these different notions often co-existed uneasily, in competition, in tension, sometimes aligned, sometimes in conflict. At the forgotten border of Evros, the two modes have, over the last twenty years, existed in a particularly uneasy balance

that was often upset. This led to frictions and conflicts, which offer a unique vantage point for interrogating the renewed centrality of racial categories in the rationalities of doing border in Europe, and into the conjunctures of *race* and racism in Europe.

The shield and the god of hospitality

Freshly elected to government in spring of 2012 – three years into the European crisis of sovereign debt, the Greek government under Prime Minister Antonis Samaras decided to launch two police operations targetting migrants and asylum seekers. The first was Operation Aspida, which was centred on the Evros border and had the suppression of irregular border crossings designated as its objective. The second was Operation Xenios Zeus (sometimes transliterated as Xenios Dias) that targeted migrant populations in urban spaces, particularly Athens.

Little material is available concerning these two operations. And while many scholarly accounts make reference to them, few offer detailed descriptions and analysis. Often, even the names of the operations are used interchangeably or synonymously.

Operation Aspida, often characterised as a surge operation, led to the deployment of an additional 1,881 border guards to the Evros region. While operation was financed through the European Union's External Border Fund (Minister of Citizen Protection 2012, 3; Angeli, Dimitriadi, and Triandafyllidou 2014, 28), it was described as a 'national operation' by the then Minister of Citizen Protection (quoted in Drakopoulou, Konstantinou, and Koros 2020, 181). It made near exclusive use of national border guard units, and operation planning and control remained in the Ministry in Athens.

Angeli, Dimitriadi, and Triandafyllidou (2014, 28f.) give the most detailed description of the operation, which resulted in the massive reduction of border crossings. However, they do not explain how this reduction was achieved. A report by amnesty international (2013) strongly indicates the indiscriminate use of pushbacks. Most officers were deployed along the river Evros. Notably, there is no indication that Operation Aspida led to the introduction of new infrastructures of migration or border management such as reception centres or additional fences.

Operation Xenios Zeus, irritatingly referring to the ancient Greek deity of hospitality (Cheliotis 2013), was launched simultaneously. Angeli et al. describe Xenios Zeus as a

series of regular round-up operations carried out in areas with high concentration of irregular migrants, including street and house searches. It was an impressively large scale operation- both in terms of geographic coverage and intensity, including large urban centres. In the beginning, checks took place on an almost daily basis. The controls performed were of a sweeping nature: every migrant who happened to be in the area of the operational activity was stopped and subjected to document checks, a procedure that could last several hours and would often take place in public. (Angeli, Dimitriadi, and Triandafyllidou 2014, 29)

Another report, published by Human Rights Watch, underlines that the identity checks carried out in the operation were based on racial profiling (Cossé 2013; see also Pillant 2015). The description of the 'sweeping nature' most likely not only describes the modus operandi of the operation, it also places Operation Xenios Zeus into a longer history of

so-called Sweeper Operations, carried out by the Athenian police against Albanian migrants in the 1990s, as described by Dimitris Dalakoglu:

The story starts in early 1990s, when the Greek police introduced ‘Operation Sweeper’. Sweepers were in fact semi-military operations within the urban territory, often centered in Omonoia and supposedly targeting undocumented migrants. These operations included blockades of entire areas and rapid raids on streets, squares, and buildings, after which detainees were taken to concentration points where many of them were made to kneel on the ground and subjected to verbal abuse and physical attacks. (Dalakoglou 2013, 31)

What is finally noteworthy about Xenios Zeus is that it intersected with similar sweep operations that the Greek police carried out against sex workers in 2012. On orders of the then health minister, police rounded up sex workers and forcibly tested them for HIV. Several women that were tested positive were then charged with deliberately endangering the health of their clients. Their personal information, including portrait pictures, were published on the website of the Greek police. Greek TV broadcast it nation-wide, ostensibly as a warning to the male clients that had fallen ‘victim’ to the ‘crimes’ of the sex workers. In at least one instance, such sweep operations were carried out during Operation Xenios Zeus (ekathimerini.com 2012). Only in 2024 did the European Court of Human Rights rule that the involuntary HIV-tests and the publication of the personal data constituted a breach of the right to respect for private life (*O.G. And Others v. Greece* 2024).

The two operations in 2012 were accompanied by a policy of indiscriminate detention of migrants and asylum seekers (Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons 2013). Asylum seekers were routinely detained, and regularly denied access to the asylum system. The latter was additionally characterised by low recognition rates of under 2%.

In these operations and migration policies, a familiar racial and patriarchal identity of the nation emerges. Police operations at the borders seek to deny territorial access to those not considered part of the nation, be it Albanians in the 1990s, or refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2010s. Sweep operations in the urban centres, particularly Athens, sought to remove those that had nevertheless managed to enter the country and make a living there (Lafazani 2018). But it is not only an ‘invasion’ of humans (Kitsantonis 2012) that the police were battling. In what foreshadowed the themes that have become much more familiar in the Covid-19 pandemic, viruses were considered invaders that had to be repelled, particularly as they threatened the atomic cell of the nation, i.e. the family and its male head. In the words of the Minister for Public Order and Citizen Protection, Dendias, when answering to a parliamentary inquiry concerning Operation Aspida:

We must join forces in the difficult but necessary and fruitful effort being made by our Ministry and the Government to find effective solutions to the migration issue. In this context and spirit, we acknowledge the contribution of the Greek Police personnel and their contribution to this common struggle. We regard the police personnel and others involved as members of the Greek Police Force, as professionals, civil servants, and family men, and we respect them. (Minister of Citizen Protection 2012, 6)

Europeanising Evros

If there was a key moment that signalled a serious attempt at Europeanising the Evros border, it is the deployment of the first ever Rapid Border Intervention Team (RABIT) by Frontex in Evros. During the summer of 2010, unauthorised crossings of the Evros border had steadily increased, and on the 24th October 2010, the Greek Minister for Citizen Protection requested the immediate support of Frontex rapid intervention teams (RABIT) and equipment due to ‘growing pressure of illegal immigration flows’, at the Evros border (Ministry of Citizen Protection 2010). Granted the next day and launched only five days later, Operation RABIT was hailed as a demonstration of European solidarity by Commission, Agency and Greek government alike. For about four months, a strong presence of border guards from other Member States and coordinated by Frontex sought changed the bordering practices in the region.

Yet a careful analysis of the RABIT deployment underscores that the attempt to bring the new European border management practices to the Evros border largely failed (Kasperek 2021), even though the availability of European funds and latest border surveillance equipment changed the daily border work. On the political level, there was mutual dissatisfaction with the Frontex operation that lasted from November 2010 until March 2011. Frontex, in an assessment of the operation (Frontex 2011), indicated that while the direct deployment of Frontex staff was considered successful, Europeanisation the border had not been achieved. By this, the agency meant the professionalisation of border management, the introduction of migration management procedures, and particularly increased cooperation with the neighbouring third countries – in this case Turkey. This all had failed to materialise: the Greek border guards deployed in Evros did not change their way of doing border, even though they readily incorporated the new surveillance systems that found their way to Evros into their practice.

The Greek government, too, was not satisfied with the operation. The presence of European personnel interrupted the sovereign mode of border control, i.e. interception, pushback and detention without access to the asylum system. The insistence of the border guards deployed by Frontex that intercepted asylum seekers were to be registered, debriefed and then transferred to the reception centre in Fylakio was not seen as an effective way of stopping unauthorised migration across the Evros border (Minister of Citizen Protection 2012) – even if it was the procedure that European legislation on borders and asylum demanded. Instead, the Greek government, on 3 January 2011 and while the operation was still ongoing, announced the construction of a fence (Anonymous 2011). The rationale was not to manage migration through reception, registration and asylum procedures, but to interdict the crossing of borders by force. The Commission was quick to rebuke this plan. ‘Earlier on Monday, a spokesman for the EU Commission said that walls and bars were “short-term measures which will not allow us to tackle illegal immigration in a structural manner”. “We made clear with Greece that the country needs sound and long-term structural reforms and measures to better manage its border, to better address the challenges linked to migration flows”, Michele Cercone [spokesperson for the Home Affairs Commissioner; the author] said’. (Anonymous 2011).

Thus, the attempt to introduce European border management practices at the Evros border in the winter of 2010/11 failed. Frontex continued to keep a presence in the

region, and Greece would continue to receive European border management funds to technologically upgrade its borders. The exact involvement of Frontex in the sovereign border control in Evros remains unclear though. There is strong circumstantial evidence that due to its continued presence, the agency must at least be aware of the state crimes perpetrated in Evros (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2020a, ch. 7). Whether this rises to the level of complicity is difficult to gauge. At least during the tenure of Fabrice Leggeri as the agency's executive director, this seems to have been the case (Kasperek 2023), even if the pattern that emerged during the investigation of the European Anti-Fraud Office OLAF into fundamental rights violations perpetrated by Frontex suggested a division of labour: surveillance assets operated by Frontex would notify Greek border guard units of irregular border crossings, and then cease observation. Fabrice Leggeri ultimately resigned from his post as executive director of the agency and is currently an MEP for the far right Rassemblement National, having run as the second candidate of the party's national list.

Sovereign infrastructures of pushbacks

Recent research on the Evros border has foregrounded the complicated history of the Evros border region (Kaşlı 2014, 2023; Teunissen and Koutrolikou 2022; Duncan and Levidis 2025). Today's border between Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey was only established about 100 years ago in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish war of independence and the Greco-Turkish war (1919–1922) that led to the infamous 'population exchange' between the Turkish and Greek states. Today's border between Greece and Turkey was only established through the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), and is a paradigmatic example of the violence that went into the establishment of national territory. It also highlights how the 'territorial ideal', i.e. seemingly 'natural' congruence of territory and national sovereignty is in fact produced through wars, deportations, and genocide. This history establishes the Evros border not simply as a demarcation of national territory, rather, it is understood as a defensive line against the Turkish state and its Muslim population.

This is particularly evident in its geography. Newly founded towns, such as the provincial capital Orestiada, are strategically located along the river and connected by a national road that runs parallel to it. As the Evros border is the only land border between Turkey and Greece, there has always been an elevated presence of Greek military camps in the area. Apart from these built infrastructures, recent scholarship has also pointed out how the shifting sands of the Evros River, its materiality and geography are inscribed into the regional border regime and form parts of its infrastructure (Levidis 2020; Duncan and Levidis 2025; Teunissen 2025). From these insights, one cannot but conclude that this particular border has a long and violent history, and that its practitioners, i.e. Greek police, border guards, and military, as well as local militias, have a deeply ingrained knowledge of the border environment and command specific capabilities in navigating the river line, sovereignty and territorial boundaries.

Yet the most striking, frightening characteristic of the Evros border is its long legacy of racist violence perpetrated by state actors against asylum seekers and migrants. Contrary to European and national legislation, intercepted asylum seekers are not forwarded to reception centres, but informally detained and then

collectively refouled, i.e. pushed back across the border to Turkey. In this process, bodily harm and humiliation are routine. Time and again, researchers, NGOs, activists, and journalists have painstakingly documented the prevalence of such practices (see overviews in Koros 2021, 239f.; Karamanidou and Kasperek 2022, 21f.). More importantly, the European Court of Human Rights has recently ruled (A.R.E. v. Greece 2025) that the alleged pushback occurred ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. The Court found that there is a systematic practice of pushbacks in Greece.

It is also the academic consensus that such practices have existed for many decades. Furthermore, there is also a broad understanding that they are not an aberration, an exceptional excess of sovereign power over border crossers, but that they constitute the *de facto* mode of border control in Evros.

I write *de facto* since the Greek state, despite all evidence to the contrary, staunchly denies that its institutions are engaged in these practices, i.e. it engages in what Davies, Isakjee, and Obradovic-Wochnik have succinctly conceptualised as ‘epistemic border-work’ (Davies, Isakjee, and Obradovic-Wochnik 2023): the work necessary to officially uphold the appearance that no state crimes are perpetrated at the border. The legal scholar and criminologist Dimitris Koros, in his article on the normalisation of pushbacks in Evros as a ‘generalized anti-immigration policy’, also discusses the secrecy and constant work of censorship that must go into the official denial of such practices (Koros 2021).

For the purpose of this article, Koros’ analysis also raises a second issue: how these practices, which he understands as ‘racist state crimes’, can be sustained over time. Applying Martha K. Huggins’ analysis on state torture in the ‘war on terror’ (Huggins 2010), Koros points out that state crimes are characterised – inter alia – by being routinised, by their bureaucratic organisation, as well as by the involvement of multiple actors (Koros 2021, 245). The implication being: pushbacks in Evros are not the work of rogue individuals or units. Rather, one must assume, they rely on an underlying shadow infrastructure that allows for the routinised administration of pushback practices through the coordination of a multiplicity of actors, such as police, border guards, military, and militias: a racial regime backed by a sovereign infrastructure of pushbacks.

An article in The New York Times reports that in September 2021, a man of Afghan origin legally residing in Italy had been travelling from Evros to Thessaloniki. He was pulled off the bus by the Greek police. According to his testimony, he was beaten, then detained in a remote warehouse along with about 100 more migrants, and later forced onto a dinghy and across the river into Turkey. In Istanbul, he received assistance from the Italian consulate, allowing him to return to Italy (Stevis-Gridneff 2021; see also Greek Ombudsman 2021).

On the surface, there is, tragically, nothing extraordinary about this case. It is but an example of the routinised pushback practices occurring in Evros on a daily basis, for many decades. What is however extraordinary about this case are the circumstances of this person’s presence in Evros: He was working as an interpreter for the European border agency Frontex, in an operation the agency was conducting in Evros. His task was to support border guards deployed in the operation by translating interrogations of asylum seekers. During his ordeal at the hands of the Greek police, he repeatedly pointed this out, yet it only intensified the violence perpetrated against him.

Due to his employment by Frontex, the circumstances of the case are better documented than in other cases. The interpreter informed the agency, which opened an internal investigation into the case by its Fundamental Rights Office (FRO), which resulted in a 16-page serious incident report (SIR) (Frontex 2021). This SIR is publicly available due to a freedom of information request, and offers a unique vantage point into the pushback infrastructure and the practices it enables. The FRO concludes that the account of the interpreter is credible, and that

the Hellenic Police Officers through coordinated actions performed a collective expulsion operation [...]. As part of this operation the Complainant [i.e. the interpreter; author] was subjected to arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention, and forcible collective expulsion to Turkey. The Office [FRO; author] further believes that Hellenic Police Officers mistreated the Complainant and took their possessions in the process of the operation (Frontex 2021, 2)

The SIR corroborates the general account given in the New York Times, and describes repeated and arbitrary instances of direct physical violence not only against the interpreter, but also other asylum seekers he was detained with. Concerning infrastructures, the SIR underlines the high degree of coordination. Buses are stopped systematically. Captured persons are transported to collection points close to police stations and detained in unofficial sites. Senior police officers supervise and give orders. The victims are transferred to the river, then forced onto rubber boats and across the river to Turkey. After the expulsion of his group, the interpreter found himself in Turkey, from where he was trying to organise his return to Greece by contacting his colleagues from Frontex. These officials were however not able to succeed, as the Hellenic Police, which by then had learned of the case of the interpreter, was trying to put a veil of secrecy over the case, promising the interpreter that they could organise his return under the condition that he did not report his circumstances to the Turkish authorities. The SIR indicated that one Frontex official sought to interact with the Greek police in order to secure the return of the interpreter, but did not find access.

The SIR details that prior to the collective expulsion, the interpreter, along with 100 other persons, were held in abandoned military barracks that seems to have served as a holding site. Together with my colleague Lena Karamanidou, we have documented one of such unofficial detention sites in 2020, a site by the name of Poros (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2020b; see also Stevis-Gridneff et al. 2020). We have reconstructed the recent history of the site, which was originally a military facility used for border surveillance, but which was transferred to the Hellenic Police in 2012. It was formally designated a 'Centre for the First Management of Illegal Immigration' and may have acted as the Southern counterpart to the more well-known First Reception Centre Fylakio in Northern Evros. In 2012, it was the main screening facility for Southern Evros. Yet by 2015, the centre was not officially listed as a border or migration management infrastructure any more. We could, however, show that the centre was, in 2020, still used as an unofficial detention centre that formed part of the sovereign infrastructure of pushbacks in Evros.

Under relevant European and Greek legislation, any person intending to lodge an asylum application – even if they crossed the border in an unauthorised manner – must be taken to a reception centre and handed over to the asylum administration. Such procedures, too, rely on infrastructures of reception and accommodation, for adjudicating asylum applications, and the logistics of deportation in case an asylum case has been

decided negatively. Yet this is not what Evros' sovereign infrastructure of pushbacks enables. The network of hidden detention sites allows for the Hellenic police and border guards to detain apprehended border crossers and asylum seekers until a sufficient number of people have been gathered in order to carry out a collective expulsion (Karamanidou, Kasperek, and Campbell 2021). Crucially, this process involves absolutely no registration or even identity check: the interpreter repeatedly offered documentation attesting both to his legal residence in the EU as well as to his employment with the Frontex agency. For the many officers perpetrating the violent expulsion, the racial profile of the affected persons was enough legitimization for robbing them, inflicting bodily harm, and pushing them across the border.

It is in this relationship to racial categories that the distinction between the European mode of border management and the sovereign mode of border control can be shown. Clearly, the system of European border management is still predicated on racial categories, encoded positively in attributes such as citizenship or negatively in anti-discrimination legislation. Yet it de-centres these categories: for one through the right to asylum, which constrains the racial logics of who may access territory. And for the other through a grounding of the rules of border management in the framework of fundamental rights and anti-discrimination legislation. The sovereign mode of border control, in contrast, elevates racial categories and translates them into racist exclusion that is violently enforced.

European racial border

This contribution, as well as this special issue, is concerned with understanding the resurgence and normalisation of violent state practices in European border and migration policies after the summer of migration in 2015. The increased use of pushbacks, i.e. the forcible return of asylum seekers to neighbouring countries in contravention of the non-refoulement principle of the Geneva Refugee Convention, as well as the increased use of indiscriminate detention of asylum seekers have been reported by activists, journalists, human rights lawyers and academics alike. The reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which was initiated through the Commission's proposed European Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020 and which was finally passed in 2024, seeks to translate these practices into law. Detention of asylum seekers at the European border will become quasi mandatory, and mechanisms have been put into place to allow for the deportation of asylum seekers to Third Countries.

Voices critical of this development more often than not contend that the European Union is responsible for this development. They cite as evidence the inactivity of the Commission to rein in member states' violent and illegal practices through infringement proceedings, the reform of the CEAS as well as the financial and operational support the EU is giving to member states. The underlying argument is that since the communitarisation of migration and border policies through the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the European Union has pursued a programme to erect a ›Fortress Europe‹, i.e. a strict and material system of border controls supported by an infrastructure of surveillance in order to create a European space from which populations of other continents are excluded on racial grounds and with racist intent. This persistence of racism in European border policy is then evidenced by the identities of those experiencing violence and death at

Europe's borders, and attributed to the continued effect of racial orders established during colonialism.

Paradigmatically, this argument is executed in the widely cited article by E. Tendayi Achiume titled 'Racial Borders' (2021). Written from a postcolonial perspective, it is strongly centred on Europe as the origin, as well as the contemporary epicentre of the international order of racial borders. Achiume advances the claim that contemporary national borders of the international order are inherently racial (448). Achiume develops this claim from the tragic death of 26 Nigerian young women in 2017 that were found on a boat floating in the Mediterranean having failed to reach Europe. She concludes that 'Blackness is a determinant of their deaths, rather than a correlative or coincidental feature' (453).

In arguing this claim, Achiume observes a puzzle: how can 'facially [race] neutral legal and policy regimes governing migration' (454) still produce racial exclusion? Achiume derives her argument about the racial character of Europe's borders from a discussion of the racialisation inherent in the immigration policies of settler colonies in the nineteenth century – particularly Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, and the United States. But following her argument on these origins of racial borders, two questions remain open. For one, how have these explicitly 'racial technologies' turned 'facially neutral'? And for the other, how have these 'racial technologies' then returned to Europe in order to become part of the EU's twenty-first century border management policies?

Achiume answers the first question through the work of Adam McKeown (2008) on Asian migration, whom she credits with having shown that these basic, racialising principles of border control became 'universalized as the foundation of sovereignty and migration control for all states within the [international] system' (McKeown 2008, cited in Achiume 2021, 459). Similar arguments have been made by legal scholars De Vries and Spijkerboer (2021) that argue that the sovereign right of states to control migration has been established as a consequence of the US Chinese exclusion legislation of the late nineteenth century (Lew-Williams 2018) and the spread of this legal doctrine around the world (see also Manke 2025).

Taking the example of the United Kingdom, Achiume shows how this international order of migration control, wrapped in the rationale of national sovereignty, returned to the nation states of Europe. But this only answers half of the second question. What is missing in Achiume's argument is how this concealed racial order is transferred from the national member states of the European Union to the European Union proper. Achiume omits to show this second transfer by claiming a linear progression from UK national politics to Schengen, i.e. the communitarised system of border control of the European Union. Her claim is that Schengen is nothing less than a version of sovereign migration and border control scaled up to the proportions of the continent and the European Union.

This argument, for different reasons, cannot hold. For one, the relationship between the UK and Schengen is a complicated one. The UK actively opposed the incorporation of Schengen into the European Union treaties in the 1990s, and in fact obtained an opt-out: During its time as a member state of the European Union, the UK remained outside the Schengen system. The UK opposed a system of supranational border control because it rejected the transfer of competences to Brussels, fearing a loss of sovereignty and control – a familiar theme in the larger history of the UK's fraught relationship to the EU.

The other reason why the argument cannot hold relates to sovereignty. As Achiume et al. have shown, the intent to exclude populations on racial grounds is re-stated as an unquestionable right of sovereign nations, thus obscuring its previously explicit racial core. However, if we take this argument about the international order of sovereign nations seriously, a problem emerges: In this order, the European Union is not sovereign. Sovereignty is not transitive, it does not simply pass from sovereign member states to the European Union. The EU is an aberration in the modern state system, and its complicated genealogy is also a consequence of its member states – not just the UK – fighting tooth and nail to maintain their sovereignty and limit the transfer of competences to the EU whenever possible.

European border management and sovereign border control

That the EU cannot be sovereign is not just a technical argument. A look at the concept of European citizenship is instructive in this respect. As is well known to the readers of this journal, it was introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). It is similarly constrained as European sovereignty. European citizenship formally and exclusively follows from citizenship in a member state of the European Union (see inter alia Guild 2004, ch. 2). There is no other path to European citizenship. Paradoxically, the European Union cannot decide on the rules of accessing membership of its political community: it has remained the prerogative of its national member states. This contradiction has created a widening gulf between formal European citizenship on the one hand, and the aspiration to a post-national notion of citizenship in Europe (Hansen and Brian Hager 2011; Isin and Saward 2013).

The construction of the EU as a supranational political body follows a liberal understanding of integration, i.e. through treaties and common legislation that would bind member states and European primary institutions alike. Political power does not flow from sovereignty, but emerges from a carefully calibrated system of treaties, law, rules, and procedures. For the field of migration and border control, the Amsterdam treaty of 1997 constituted the starting point. After many decades of intergovernmental coordination, Amsterdam had finally incorporated the Schengen Agreements into EU primary law, and had assigned sole legislative competence in the fields of migration, asylum, and borders to the European Community. However, the implementation of these policies was left to the member states. This resulted in the palpable tensions between the different rationalities of doing border.

Ruben Zaiotti, in his book on the evolution of the European border (2011), distinguishes between a Westphalian culture of border control on the one hand, and two European cultures on the other. While his main argument concerns the culture of Schengen, for the purpose of this contribution, revisiting how he characterises the Westphalian border vis-à-vis the European border is instructive. The Westphalian system of borders assumes a close nexus between sovereignty and territory: ‘This conception of borders and territoriality, what Murphy (1996) calls the “sovereign territorial ideal”, has become so ingrained in everyday life and politics around the world that it seems like the natural way of doing things’ (Zaiotti 2011, 46). Westphalian borders then are the limit of the state’s sovereign power as well as the topos where a national territory, as well as the population contained within it, are guarded. This paradoxically results in the excessive

application of sovereign power at national borders and insufficient juridical recourse for victims of border violence.

As I have shown for the European border (Kasperek 2026, 2021), the challenge of producing a European border by networking the member state border guard institutions was addressed through a new border epistemology of risk and a technological promise of a smart border, premised on European databases and surveillance technology. For these operations, the EU adopted the notion of integrated border management (IBM), first adopted as a loose set of principles by the Council in 2006 (Council of the European Union 2006), and then codified in 2016 (Regulation (EU) 2016/1624). ‘Border management’ is not just a new term for the old labour of ‘border control’. Hobbing (2005) locates the origin of the term in the 1990s, and characterises it as ‘the common understanding that IBM relates to “lean government” approaches and that border procedures should be governed by modern economic strategies rather than slow bureaucratic structures’ (Hobbing 2005, 2), representing the ‘delicate attempt to marry security concerns with trade facilitation’. In this sense, the move from border control to border management is a conceptual one, akin to the fundamental shift from ‘migration control’ to ‘migration management’ which Geiger and Pécoud have analysed as a set of practices, actors and discourses that institute a neoliberal, technocratic and depoliticised approach to migration whose ultimate aim is not control, but steerage (Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

In order to understand how this European mode of border management relates to the racial character of borders in Europe, an example from the 1970s is instructive. In that decade, attempts were made to breathe new life into the European project, and ideas such as a Passport Union and European Citizenship were floated as a means of deepening integration. The abolition of border controls between the participating states was discussed as part of these measures. One proposal by the member states was to abolish all passport checks for citizens of member states of the European Communities, but not for Third Country citizens. The European Commission under President Ortolí rejected this approach, stating that ‘abolition of identity checks at internal frontiers can not be selective and apply only to nationals of the Member States to enable them alone to move freely within the Community’. The reason was quite simple: ‘It is impossible to distinguish between nationals of another Member State from those of a non-member country’ (Commission of the European Communities 1975, 2.3.3). Even if not spelt out in these words, the concern of the Commission is racial profiling, i.e. that persons would be controlled not for their citizenship, but on the basis of racial categorisations. The Ortolí Commission, including famous European federalist Altiero Spinelli, was certainly aware of the legacies of European racism to which the European project was also an answer to. It therefore makes an early argument for non-discrimination. This argument is not necessarily an explicitly antiracist one: given the remit of the European Commission, one would rather understand it as a liberal argument in order to reduce access barriers to the Common Market. However, it shows how the language of anti-discriminations is mobilised early on in the European project and in reference to borders.

Clearly, a lot happened between 1975 and the inauguration of European migration and border policies after 1999. Also, a differentiation must be made between internal borders, which were generally understood as a barrier to deepened integration, and external borders, whose efficient management was regarded as a precondition for a common European migration policy. In my decade-long research on the European

border agency Frontex, I also observed Achiume's puzzle of 'facially neutral' legislation giving rise to racial exclusion myself. My observation was that 'the inclusions and exclusions resulting from European migration and border policies run along traditional, racist hierarchisations of society and reproduce them at the same time' (Kasperek 2021, 339, my translation). However, I also noted that the policy and legislative documents did not reference these well-known tropes, which made me wonder how they were activated and reproduced. The persistence hints at something deeper, at the hidden substrate of 'race'. Crucially, even a policy of anti-discrimination, borne out of the wish to overcome the racial divisions that have plagued the European continent in its history, runs the risk of affirming 'race' as a category even while insisting at the same time that it must be inconsequential, i.e. may not lead to racist acts.

European border management, as a technocratic, liberal, and neoliberal approach, never aimed at undoing the racial character of European borders, but displaced it through notions of economic utility, humanitarian deservingness and fundamental rights. Crucially, one can also argue that it also did not put a stop to sovereign violence perpetrated at the border, but sought to displace it into databases and to externalise it to Third Countries. Yet at the borders of Europe, it had to co-exist with older modes of border control which saw the border not as a device to facilitate flows and manage migration, but as the Westphalian demarcation of sovereignty and a device to guard a population contained within.

Conclusion

The overview over the different border and migration control operations presented in this article underscores that the racist state violence in Evros is neither a regional specificity, nor a phenomenon isolated in time. Dalakoglu's description of the sweeper operations of the 1990s, which equally led to the collective expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Albanians from Greece, eerily echoes the description of pushback practices in Evros. There is a long history and rationality to this mode of not only exerting control over migration, but at the same time re-producing the nation, protecting its territory and population, and asserting sovereignty. This history and rationality of nationalism is deeply interwoven with racial categories, and finds its expression in racist violence and exclusion.

It was, however, wrong to understand the tentative attempts of introducing a European border management rationality into Evros and Greece as anything akin to a 'civilising mission' intended to put an end to racist violence. Such an argument would only reproduce different and older European racisms, an inner-European form of orientalism. At the same time, such an argument would falsely identify the origin of European border management rationalities in a humanist or humanitarian project. The European project, initially, was certainly concerned with preventing, once and for all, a resurgence of the nationalist, racial, and racist violence that had consumed the continent for centuries, and particularly in the first half of the twenty-first century. Yet the path the project took was first a liberal, and after 1990 a neoliberal one. Under this perspective, racism and racist discrimination are arbitrary and unjustifiable obstacles to participation in markets and societies. Racial categories, then, can at most be codified negatively into

law as a ban on discrimination. This leaves racial categories untouched, but blunts their exclusionary application. Applied to the borders of Europe, the promise of European border management then was not an exclusion on racist grounds, but a filtering, a differential inclusion of persons based not on collective, i.e. racial attributes, but on individual attributes – epitomised in the figure of the desirable ‘high-skilled migrant’. Herein lies the reason for the massive investments into border technologies that lies at the centre of European border management.

Seyla Benhabib, in her essay ‘Transformations of Citizenship: The Case of Contemporary Europe’ (Benhabib 2002), took such instances of a ‘detritorialisation of politics’ and the concomitant rise of new forms of political globalisation as a point of departure in order to discuss the notion of a European citizenship. With reference to the power and dominance of the nation state, she wrote:

In fact, the irony of current political developments is that while state sovereignty in economic, military and technological domains has been eroded, it is nonetheless vigorously asserted, and national borders, while more porous, are still there to keep out aliens and intruders. The old political structures may have waned but the new political forms of globalization are not yet in sight. The emergence of international human rights norms, and the frequent conflicts, in theory and practice, between such norms and national sovereignty claims, are the clearest harbingers of new forms of political globalization. (441)

About a decade later, in the summer of migration 2015, these new forms of political globalisation, or in the European case, the emergence of a post-national political form, found a preliminary end. Von der Leyen’s nod to Aspida may be interpreted as a small admission that the modes of bordering that the Commission had pursued since Amsterdam have failed, and that the way forward for Europe would be a return to the old and tested ways of sovereign control over borders. Implicitly, this signalled an acquiescence to the racist violence at the core of these modes, and rejected the validity of international human rights norms. In this respect, the events of March 2020 signalled a significant shift in the articulation of a European belonging through the Evros border. The media attention given to Ursula Von der Leyen’s remark that Evros is the shield of Europe obscured the emphatic assertion of Greece as the protector of the European border and Europe. While expressing his appreciation for the spectacle of European solidarity at the border, Greek prime minister Mitsotakis stated that

[. . .] Greece is also doing Europe a great service. The border of Greece is the external border of the European Union. We will protect it. Greece expects tangible solidarity from the European Union [. . .]. But let’s be honest. Europe has not been up to the task of dealing with the migration crisis. I hope this crisis will serve as a wake-up call for everyone to assume their responsibilities. (Mitsotakis 2020)

And indeed, the Evros crisis of 2020 served as a catalyst. In September 2020, the infamous reception and detention centre Moria on the Greek island of Lesbos burned to the ground. The Commission reacted by proposing its New Pact on Migration and Asylum, a substantial reform of the Common European Asylum System that enters into force in the summer of 2026. The reform heralds a return to sovereign modes of border control by severely undercutting access to asylum, instead prioritising detention and return of asylum seekers.

Seyla Benhabib, in her 2002 essay, noted that '[n]owhere are the challenges posed to democratic sovereignty by the worldwide migration of peoples more evident today than within the newly emergent institutions and practices of the European Union. Institutional developments within the EU have led to a new reconfiguration of human rights and sovereignty claims. What is emerging at the present is "disaggregated citizenship" and differential rights regimes for different groups'. (2002, 453). Benhabib was hopeful that a European, disaggregated citizenship, would lead to a transformation of democratic sovereignty, finally abandoning its reliance on the two political fictions of a 'homogeneous people' and a 'self-enclosed and autochthonous territory' (463).

Yet the persistence, and intensification of racist border violence in Europe underscores that both fictions, epitomised in the racial border, are returning. The state crimes against the people of the move today are a threat for citizenship and democracy in Europe tomorrow.

Note

1. About ten days later, on March 2, 2020, the European border agency Frontex deployed 100 officers from 22 member states through its Rapid Border Intervention Team (RABIT) mechanism.

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