The human (in)security trap: how European border(ing) practices condemn migrants to vulnerability

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Abstract

This article explores the experience of migrants at Europe's borders and beyond building upon the notion of human security—or rather its antithesis insecurity—and looking at it afresh through the lenses of border studies. It introduces the concept of 'human insecurity trap' as a tool to grasp the insecurities and vulnerabilities of people-on-the-move and the different border(ing)s, barriers and confinements they stem from. The article argues that smuggling to and across Europe, as well as EU and MS policy apparatus, entraps migrants into a spiral of human insecurity which unfolds at different levels and borders: at sea, in the ongoing struggle between smugglers and EU counter-smuggling operations; at the state border, where bureaucratic limbo and the (mis)management of shipwrecked migrants and asylum-seekers variously contend and combine with populist anti-migrant discourse; and across the EU, as practices of 're-smuggling' and 'secondary movement' compete with practices of mobility limits, returns and border closures.

Keywords Smuggling · Mediterranean · Human (in)security · (Im)mobility · Fortress Europe · Asylum

People moving by boat make up only a part of irregular migration to the European Union (EU).[1] Yet the dramatic increase in boat-borne migrants to the EU across the Mediterranean—and the tragic fate that awaited many of them—indelibly marked the European refugee/migration crisis as a 'maritime' one (UNHCR 2015). According to Europol (2018), most of these sea-crossings were organized by criminal networks, which packed migrants in unsafe and overcrowded vessels. In the absence of alternative channels for migration, the management of mobility by smugglers made

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[1] Visa overstayers are also a significant source of irregular migration. See European Commission (2018), Staff Working Document, SWD 195 final, Brussels, 16.5.2018

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the journey of people-on-the-move dangerously insecure putting them at significant risk of distress, injury and death *en route*.

Between 2014 and September 2020, over 20,300 people[2] went missing, presumed dead in the Mediterranean. Strikingly, this number is comparable to (or higher than) the number of fatalities recorded in many armed conflicts.[3] In light of these tragedies, and related public outcry, the EU and its member states (MS) addressed the boat-crossing phenomenon through various counter-smuggling and border-surveillance policies to control borders and irregular migration, disrupt smugglers and reduce deaths.

While some commentators have claimed that the EU's response to the migrant crisis is "all at sea" (The Economist 2019), I rather proceed from the assumption that the crisis and -above all- the human (in)security implications thereof extend far beyond the maritime boundaries of the Mediterranean. For those who manage to survive boat journeys and make it to Europe in search of protection and better life opportunities, crossing of sea border does not automatically mean crossing a 'threshold of salvation' (Albahari 2015: 20). More and more often people-on-the-move must overcome further barriers at the edges of EU-Europe as well as in its core. The 15 walls and fences built at the external and internal borders (Benedicto and Brunet 2018), as well as the temporary reintroduction of border-checks in the Schengen area, make further smuggling/secondary movements across the EU even more dangerous. While fences and walls are the most obvious material-spatial representation of MS practices to control mobility (Cabot 2014), there are also less visible barriers, which are shaped by both political discourses and practices of migration management and which have created new spaces of confinement -both physical and psycho-social (Jones et al. 2017).

The multiplicity of contrasting practices and discourses, as well as the convoluted intersection of physical borders and invisible barriers, produced new bordering processes and 'spaces' of human insecurities where the stake is not only the survival of people-on-the-move, but also a spectrum of profound insecurities pertaining to protection gaps, (im)mobility, reception and asylum. In this sense, the human security of people-on-the-move in the Mediterranean and in the EU seems caught up in various '(in)humanitarian borderlands', i.e. 'conflicting environments, where the objectives of protecting state security clash with the needs of vulnerable groups in precarious life situations' (Aas and Gundhus 2015: 2).

This article aims to delve into the connection between borderings and human insecurity in Europe's migration crisis, by focusing on smuggling *to* and *across* Europe and on the EU and its MS' (mis)management of the crisis. The article argues that migrants are caught between various rocks and hard places constraining them in a series of 'human insecurity traps' unfolding at different levels and in different

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[2] IOM, Missing Migrants Project.

[3] According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, the conflict in Libya recorded 13,278 fatalities (2011–2019); the conflict in Sierra Leone 20,443 (1991–2002); the war in Eritrea 19,936 (1993–2016). The number of deaths in the Mediterranean (2014–September 2020) is higher or almost equal to these figures.

places: at sea, in the ongoing struggle between smugglers and EU counter-smuggling operations; at member state borders, where bureaucratic limbo and the (mis)management of shipwrecked migrants and asylum-seekers contend and combine with populist anti-migrant discourse; and across the EU interior, as 're-smuggling' practices (Fontana 2020) and secondary movements compete with mobility limits, roving controls, 'returns' and border closures.

Theoretically, this work builds upon the notion of human security by looking at it afresh through the lenses of border studies. A growing body of academic literature now exists on the human security implications of migration flows in the Mediterranean (among others, Biondi 2016; Odutayo 2016; Boulby and Christie 2018). While building on these findings, the article seeks to go further by deploying the concept of the 'human insecurity trap' as a tool to grasp the insecurities of people-on-the-move and the different borderings, barriers and confinements they stem from.

Empirically, the article explores border(ing) practices and their effects building upon official documents and interviews. While the spatial focus of the analysis is the EU and the Mediterranean, Italy is adopted as a useful and indicative observation point of what happens at the state border and—from there—across Europe. As well as analysis of relevant documents and literature, I conducted interviews with EASO, IOM, FRONTEX, Italian Prosecutors and officials in charge of processing asylum claims. Moreover, I visited the largest European Reception Centre for Asylum-Seekers (the so-called CARA) in Mineo, Sicily, and interacted with asylum-seekers hosted there, which allowed for direct, yet informal, discussion of their experiences.

The article is organized as follows. The first part theoretically reviews human security through the lenses of border(ing)s and develops the notion of 'human insecurity trap'. The second empirically explores migrants' human insecurities and the related bordering processes in the Mediterranean and the EU. The last part draws conclusions and implications of the analysis.

Human insecurity, border(ing)s and mobility

Introduced by the United Nations Human Development Report (UNDP 1994), 'Human Security' emerged as a new paradigm that moved away from traditional narrow conceptualizations of security. By putting 'people first', it prompted a shift from the 'security of the state' to the 'security of the individual' (Axworthy 2001). Therefore, it underpins protection and empowerment, i.e. to shield people from critical menaces that are beyond their control and that threaten their survival, livelihood and dignity, while also aiming to help people develop resilience to difficult situations (CHS 2003; UN 2009).

While human security has often been criticized for being a contested concept with analytical and methodological problems (Suhrke 1999; Paris 2001), it remains an 'imperfect' (Odutayo 2016) and yet effective approach to the many underlying threats of mass migration that fall on migrants themselves (Vietti and Scribner 2013: 18). By emphasizing extreme vulnerability (Suhrke 1999)—seen as threat exposure, inability to mitigate danger and lack of resilience (Owen 2008)—human security is well suited to analyse people-on-the-move's vulnerabilities and to problematize the

role of border(ing)s as a source of vulnerability and insecurity, when they are often framed as the opposite—as sources of protection and security.

Borders have traditionally been a key part of the fabric of territorial sovereignty and the main referent objects of state security, which was configured as a boundary function (Agnew 1994a; Albert 1998; Bigo 2001). Insecurity was thus associated with the world beyond the boundaries of the sovereign territorial state, in a clear-cut dichotomy between an apparently secure inside and an insecure and dangerous outside (Agnew 1994b: 99; Walker 1993). In this demarcation of sovereign territories, frontiers are markers of identity linked to a form of ideological bonding that manifests itself through processes of othering and binary distinctions between us and them, here and there, inclusion and exclusion (Anderson 1996; Paasi 2011; Newman 2006). While borders have recently become very permeable to flows of people and goods, and notions of borderless world and deterritorialization have been taken up by scholars (Behr 2008; Debrix 1998; Wastl-Walter 2011: 2), complex dynamics of border erosion and reinforcement came to be at play at the same time, with expanded controls in terms of enforcement and policing to selectively deny territorial access and come to terms with states' perceived insecurity in a globalized world (Andreas 2003; Vallet 2016).

These understandings of inside/outside and security/insecurity were contested by critical border studies, which emancipate the study of borders from traditional territorial models. They emphasize the dispersion of borders, as well as the bordering practices, processes and discourses through which borders are produced and re-produced, dis-located and relocated over space and time, between persistence of old boundaries and multiplication of new forms and functions that take place in nontraditional locations (Brambilla 2015; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012; Salter 2012; Perkins and Rumford 2013; Vaughan-Williams 2015). Borders are thus not necessarily visible, and the perspective of those at, on, or shaping the border is taken as an alternative view to 'seeing like a state' when studying borders (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012; Rumford 2012). By recognizing that borders in their multiple locations mean different things to different actors (Rumford 2012: 894) and that a brick-wall may represent security for some and suppression for others (Wastl-Walter 2011: 2), this scholarship allows for reconsiderations of what the very concepts of border and security/insecurity refer to (Vaughan-Williams 2015), locating and relocating the referent object of (in)security.

Human security resonates with these understandings (Reveron and Mahoney-Norris 2018). By broadening the focus from the security of borders to the security of people inside, across and beyond borders, irrespective of citizenship (UNDP 1994; CHS 2003), it provides a prism for exploring the complex intertwining of human mobility, vulnerability and boder(ing)s in their various forms and locations, while exposing their critical role for producing security—and drawing spaces of human insecurity.

The significance of borders in this domain stems from the fact that they shape human mobility, the patterns of which are inherently related to human (in)security. Those who lack the possibility to move and to relocate in safer places suffer higher vulnerability and exposure to violent conflicts, repression, economic destitution,

environmental disasters, hunger or diseases.[4] In this sense, human (in)security is a major driver of migration, with migrants moving to seek a safe haven from threats to their security. While mobility itself entails several risks exposing migrants to other threats (Oberleitner and Salomon 2017: 11), migration remains a vital strategy to protect or attain human security (CHS 2003). Nevertheless, migration has always been perceived as a question of control over sovereign territorial domains (Vietti and Scribner 2013), with states retaining their role of gatekeepers of mobility (Song 2015). The enforcement of physical borders, walls and customs not only inhibits mobility, but also generates human insecurity by preventing vulnerable people from escaping critical and pervasive threats. Moreover, practices of heavy patrolling and 'push-backs' adds to the many risks inherent to migrant journeys.

Territorial borders—in terms of borderlines and geographical dividing lines—are not the only barriers to people's mobility and human security. As already said, borders have 'complexified', expanded, become diffuse and proliferated in a variety of social and political arenas (Brambilla et al. 2017; Brambilla 2015). Bordering processes may thus materialize in traditional walls or be produced through practices, such as mobile police controls, smart borders and surveillance technologies as new virtual defence lines to reinforce traditional barriers while transcending the physical limits of territories (Johnson et al. 2011; Benedicto and Brunet 2018; Follis 2017). Borderings may also leave little material trace and be produced through discourses, such as those that divide 'native populations' from incomers, 'citizens' from 'aliens' (Lapid 2001), and reduce the complexities of human mobility to legal and political categories (Bilgiç 2018). Whereas human security is indivisible (UNDP 1994: 8) with no distinction between vulnerable individuals, border security practices hinder the application of human security to 'people everywhere' (UNDP 1994: 3) and confine people-on-the-move to arbitrary categories (economic/non-economic/undocumented migrants; asylum-seekers, refugees, etc.). The practices and discourses of this 'categorical fetishism' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018) delineate the contours of inclusion/exclusion not only between citizens and foreigners, but also within the very category of people-on-the-move, by distinguishing between regular and irregular migrants and, in the latter category, between those who are entitled to protection and those who are not. Hotspots, camps, reception centres are the physical manifestations of these bordering practices, filtering people in distress and prioritizing certain threats to human security over others. Contrasting patterns of mobility, immobility and return thereby emerge. Vulnerable people might remain 'trapped' in the intermediate space between asylum-seeking and refugee status (ibid:51); might continue to move in a disarray of insecurity and irregularity or might be forcibly returned to the very same conditions of suffering they attempted to flee.

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[4] Human security includes economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, political security, personal security and community security. See UNDP (1994).

The human insecurity trap

The intricate intersection of physical borders and bordering processes, as well as the multiplicity of contrasting practices and discourses of migration management, produce human insecurity traps. These are physical, but also psycho-social spaces where a downward spiral of sustained insecurity is enacted through migrants' encounters with a continuous series of barriers, border(ing)s, dysfunctional or uncaring norms and institutions (Andersen-Rodgers and Crawford 2018: 16) that can ultimately threaten their lives as well as their livelihoods. In human insecurity traps, people-on-the-move muddle through in a vicious cycle of insecurities and a continuous struggle for mobility and safety. The need to move in search of protection, on the one hand, and the hazards of the journey, on the other; border enforcement, on the one hand, and lack of legal mobility channels, on the other. The discrepancy between existing legal frameworks of protection and the contemporary patterns of forced migration (Zetter 2015); the contradictions between procedures to recognize asylum and the protection gaps of 'bureaucratically controlled' borders (Weber and Pickering 2011). These are just some of the dichotomies of hostility and protection, help and control, the absence and presence of law (Aas and Gundhus 2015: 2) mobility and immobility that draw the borders of human insecurity traps.

Stemming from the wave of migrants surging into the EU across the Mediterranean—and the EU/MS inadequate response—the migration/refugee crisis inevitably put the spotlight on 'human encounters with state sovereignty at the border' (Jones et al. 2017: 1). It made powerfully evident the variable geometries of borders, borderings[5] and walling in the EU, the transformation of their nature and location, as well as their centrality in both political and geographical terms. Paraphrasing Etienne Balibar (1998: 217–20),[6] the crisis revealed not only that borders continue to constitute the core of politics, but also that they still very much take place at the frontier as well as elsewhere.[7]

The fortification of Europe through the proliferation of border(ing)s and maritime, physical and virtual walls (Benedicto and Brunet 2018) contends with people-on-the-move's attempts to cross the EU external and internal borders irregularly, through smugglers or alone. Exploring the migration crisis in the Mediterranean through the prism of the 'human insecurity trap', the article argues that migrants are caught between various rocks and hard places shaped by a complex interplay of practices and discourses, physical borders and borderings setting up visible and invisible walls, at different levels (Fig. 1). At sea, smuggling practices struggle with EU counter-smuggling policies aimed at defending 'Fortress Europe'. This struggle transforms the Mediterranean from a 'porous border' (Fargues and Bonfanti 2014)

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[5] On this point see both the Introduction of this Special Issue and the contribution by Tallis.

[6] According to Balibar (1998: 217–20) 'borders […] are no longer at the border', in the sense that they are being 'multiplied' and are 'no longer the shores of politics but […] the space of the political itself'.

[7] The externalization of border management to third countries further suggests that EU border is being relocated also beyond EU shores, moving south into sub-Saharan Africa or east into Turkey.

into a hard-maritime border wall. Here, border-related deaths emerge as showcases of insecurity and distress in terms of loud and abrupt emergencies.

At the state border, by contrast, 'walls of fear' (Benedicto and Brunet 2018) and populist anti-migrant discourses on the one side, and bureaucratic barriers and (mis)management of shipwrecked migrants on the other, fuel slower and more silent losses of human security. Finally, across the EU, 're-smuggling' practices and onward, irregular secondary movements contend with the mobility limits and the fences stemming from the making, remaking, debordering and re-bordering of the Schengen area (Staudt and Spencer 1998; Walters 2002).

## Mapping the trap: bordering practices and migrants' human insecurity

This section explores the human insecurity trap, focusing on the inherent bordering practices and processes at sea, at the MS border and across the EU/Schengen interior. Whereas the various dimensions of the trap, as shown in Fig. 1, are distinguished for analytical purposes, at the empirical level they are closely entwined and mutually influence each other, casting vulnerable people into various spaces of vulnerability in transit, (im)mobility in and towards insecurity.

At sea: smuggling, counter-smuggling and the hard-maritime border

The Mediterranean is one of the most dangerous borders of the EU, with a dramatic scale of death exposure and individual vulnerability. While the absolute number of arrivals and deaths fell sharply between 2017 and 2018, the fatality rate rose markedly from four people dead per 1000 sea-crossings in 2015, to 20 in 2018 (UNHCR 2019). Drowning is the first cause of death due to shipwrecks, capsizing, panicking, stampede and overcrowded unseaworthy vessels. Physical distress, in terms of harsh travelling conditions, dehydration, hyper/hypothermia, starvation and lack of access to medical treatments, is the second biggest cause of death in Mediterranean routes and the first for Northern-African transit itineraries. Other causes of death include brutal violence by smugglers, suffocation and vehicle/vessels accidents (Table 1).

A proper understanding of these fatal outcomes requires an exploration of both smuggling practices and, symbiotically (Weber and Pickering 2011), EU anti-smuggling policies and practices, the struggle between which has transformed the Mediterranean into a 'hotspot of aggregated insecurity' (Owen 2008: 53). The current dimension of the smuggling phenomenon reflects an unprecedented demand for mobility from people forcibly fleeing their homes. Smuggling is in fact both a consequence and a cause of human insecurity. 'Life-seekers' (Pallister-Wilkins 2016) resort to smuggling to flee misery and persecution in the absence of alternative channels of mobility; at the same time smuggling puts migrants in danger, with similar or even worse levels of insecurity (Coluccello and Massey 2015) due to the hardships of unregulated modes of transport and the abuses endured in transit (Weber and Pickering 2011). In a context of restrictive migration regimes, the
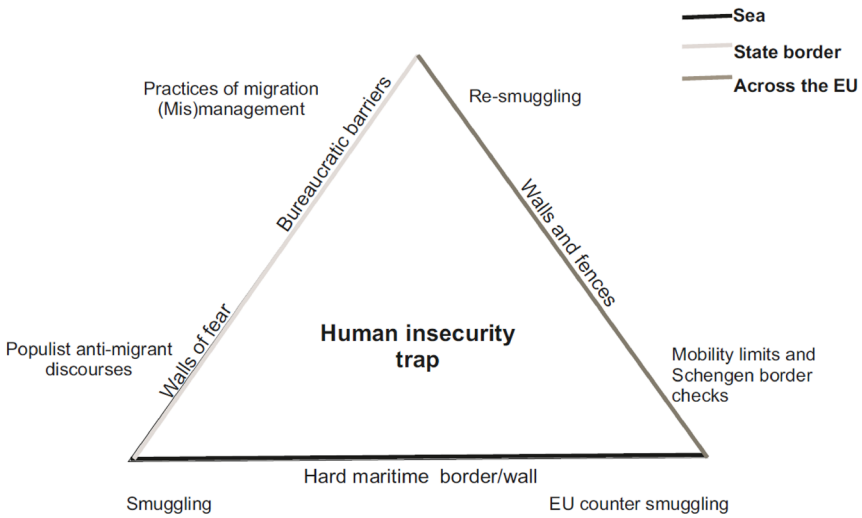
Fig. 1 The human insecurity trap in the Mediterranean migration/refugee crisis

provision of irregular forms of mobility by criminal networks adds to people's lack of resilience and threat exposure.

This permanent condition of insecurity is reinforced by the array (and, sometimes, the disarray) of EU/MS anti-smuggling practices and related discourses. Since 2015, the fight against human smuggling has been identified as an essential part of the EU crisis management toolkit. The European Agenda on Migration (European Commission 2015a), the EU Action Plan Against Migrants Smuggling (2015–2020) (European Commission 2015b) and the EUNAVFORMED/Sophia naval operation became the cornerstone of efforts devoted to preventing and dismantling criminal networks as a precondition to save lives and reduce fatalities. While this approach has repeatedly been questioned in terms of effectiveness[8] (Perkowski and Squire 2018; Bilgiç and Pace 2017) and unintended consequences[9] (Reslow 2019; Sørensen et al. 2017), what concerns us here are the many bordering(s) and 'maritime-hardening' processes stemming from EU anti-smuggling policy and their implications in terms of mobility and human security.

EU counter-smuggling appears to have swung between inaction or inadequate action and overwhelming force (Kaldor 2013). Inaction is powerfully embodied

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[8] For instance, the number of recorded deaths at sea is indicative of the failed humanitarian dimension of EU anti-smuggling initiatives. On the point, see Perkowski and Squire (2018).

[9] Migration policies can have unintended and dramatic consequences which make the policy itself ineffective: for instance, the increase in border controls may not only fail to achieve the stated goal of curbing irregular migration, but also lead to a higher number of deaths at the border. On the point, see Reslow (2019).

Table 1 Main causes of death in the Mediterranean and Northern Africa (2014–September 2020). *Source*: Author's elaboration from IOM-Missing Migrants Project, 'Mediterranean' and 'Northern Africa'

Drowned	19449
Suffocated	311
Distressed conditions (hyper/hypothermia, starvation, dehydration, disease, lack of medicines)	3560
Accidents (vehicles, crash, burnt, collisions)	684
Violence/shot/physical abuse	534
Unknown, found on a dinghy	1056

by the lack of proper mobility channels. Whereas the 2015 Action Plan stated the importance of opening 'more safe legal ways into the EU', the Joint Communication released 2 years later emphasized a somewhat different logic on the rationale 'reducing the number of crossings, saving lives at sea' (European Commission 2017: 5). This approach not only perpetuates the 'smuggling industry' and fails to liberate individuals from the need to use it (Albahari 2018; Anderson 2016). It also forces migrants into *sea wandering*, confining people-on-the-move in a space of vulnerability, where the only available option is a leaky boat (Fargues and Bonfanti 2014). Especially following the twist and turn of political decisions to close routes, the demand of mobility inevitably reorients itself with smugglers providing new- and often more dangerous- passages that greatly increase the chances of dying at sea.[10] The number of people dying in 2018 while trying to cross the sea to Cyprus, on a route where no deaths had previously been reported, is a case in point.[11] In this sense, the combination of smuggling, EU inaction and action to border closures influences how, where and when migrants move, as well as how safe and vulnerable they are along the journey.

The inadequateness of EU action is also evident in the dialectic of 'care and control' (Pallister-Wilkins 2015: 54) that informs its approach. The core tenants of 'countering smugglers' and 'saving lives'—as expression of complementary securitarian and humanitarian logics[12] (Bilgiç 2018; Panebianco 2016)—relegate search and rescue to a mere subdomain in the fight against illegal activities. As a FRONTEX officer put it[13]: 'While we are at sea, we address everything […] including drug trafficking, pollution, fishery controls. We don't only focus on migration. It's like having an eye there at the border, to report everything that is illegal'. This surveillance is facilitated by EUROSUR, as a virtual wall of drones, satellites, and sensors to track migrants and intercept boats in the 'pre-frontier' before they reach Europe (Benedicto and Brunet 2018; Follis 2017). This early detection of smugglers is justified not only on the ground to prevent tragedies at sea but also 'to make sure that nobody reaches the territory of the EU and continues [moving] without

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[10] Skype Interview with IOM Cyprus, September 2018.

[11] UNHCR, 'Mediterranean crossings deadlier than ever', 09/2018. https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/9/5b8935964/mediterranean-crossings-deadlier-new-unhcr-report-shows.html

[12] On the complementarity of humanitarian and security practices see also Panebianco, in this issue.

[13] Interview with FRONTEX, Catania, 07/2017.

being unchecked'.[14] It is thus not puzzling that of the main EU maritime operations (EUNAVFORMED/Sophia, Poseidon, Hera, Andale, Minerva, Hermes and Triton) none has an exclusive mandate of rescuing people (Benedicto and Brunet 2018). In particular, the EUNAVFORMED/Sophia's goal to apprehend smugglers and seize their vessels[15] resulted into more processes of confinement for vulnerable migrants, with forms of 'rescue-through-interdiction' (Moreno-Lax 2018) and curtailed mobility. Moreover, by compelling criminal organizations to overhaul their strategy—replacing robust vessels with low-cost dinghies and using migrants in lieu of professional smugglers to reduce economic losses and risks of arrest[16]—it heightened the hazard of the journey.

The externalization of border surveillance to third countries is a showcase of 'overwhelming force' that achieves displacement of death exposure, shifting the site of death risk away from EU shores (Garelli and Tazzioli 2018: 690). The agreement with Libyan Coast Guard to prevent smugglers from departing, intercept migrants and push them back to Libya transforms transit countries into a space of containment. Migrants brought back to Libya are either detained in governmental centres or blackmailed by traffickers. In both cases, the treatment is so inhuman and degrading that many of them prefer to return voluntary to their country of origin,[17] or to try the journey again, in a vicious circle of harm with no openings or escape routes.

Overall, smuggling as well as the whole EU's architecture of containment and control co-produces a particular human insecurity trap at sea—which extends/links back to origin countries. People-on-the-move are forced to choose between either remaining in contexts where they are exposed to various precarious living conditions; or to flee home and cross the Mediterranean.[18] Either course engenders a risk of death due to border(ing) practices (lack of legal mobility channels fuelling smuggling, interdiction, refoulement, forced returns) that not only entrap people in a permanent human insecurity, but also prevent potential asylum-seekers from reaching the EU and making asylum claims. Paradoxically, any tentative search for protection is conditional upon putting life at further risk by crossing the hard-maritime border.

EU member state borders: bureaucratic barriers and walls of fear

For those who manage to escape the trap at sea and make it to through the maritime border wall, the Mediterranean is not the last frontier before Europe and before protection. Rather, people-on-the-move must overcome other barriers that aim to exclude them 'when physical borders failed to do so' (Dauvergne 2008: 169). After

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Between June 2015 and November 2018, Operation EUNAVFORMED/Sophia apprehended over 151 suspected smugglers and traffickers and seized around 551 assets.

[16] Interview with two Italian Prosecutors, Catania, 07/2018.

[17] Interview with IOM Italy. Catania, 07/2018.

[18] On migrants' "fractured agency in 'deciding' to leave for Europe", see Vaughan-Williams and Pisani (2020) Migrating borders, bordering lives: everyday geographies of ontological security and insecurity in Malta. *Social & Cultural Geography*.

rescue, shipwrecked migrants are disembarked in safe ports where they receive immediate humanitarian assistance in terms of health care, food, shelter and psychological support. At the same time, they must undergo registration, fingerprinting and security checks 'to make sure that everyone is checked and to guarantee security at the border'.[19] In a complex entwining of humanitarian and securitarian approaches, where border security is shaped by a 'sectarian' logic of categorization of vulnerable people, those 'at risk become a risk when they enter the space marked by the [state] border' (Pallister-Wilkins 2015: 54). Whereas the EU Agenda for Migration (European Commission 2015a) emphasizes the 'duty to protect those in need' and to 'provide a safe haven for those fleeing persecution', it also sets up a 'hotspot approach' where migrants are screened and roughly divided between those clearly in need of protection and all the others (Sciurba and Furri 2017: 768). In most cases, nationality is a criterion to delineate those who are entitled to safety and those who are not, thereby defining hierarchies of risk (Weber and Pickering 2011) and hampering human security as protection for vulnerable people beyond nationality.

An array of bordering practices and bureaucratic boundaries at the MS border filters people in distress, creates barriers and affects their human security and mobility in terms of moving, dwelling and returning. The deposit of the asylum claim is itself a barrier, due to lack of information and interpreters. As said by an EASO official assisting Italian caseworkers: 'Many [asylum-seekers] have no clue of what they are really doing when depositing an asylum claim'.[20] In this sense, they are overwhelmed by the state bureaucratic apparatus and rendered dependent on information they do not fully understand.[21] Those who manage to ask for asylum linger in a limbo of *immobility in insecurity*. The long delays in the processing of claims confine asylum-seekers to a grey area between the seeking of 'international protection' and the recognition of refugee status. Government reception facilities are the most visible manifestation of this confinement. Asylum-seekers can wait there for several months or even years without receiving the outcome of their application, in conditions of thwarted mobility, frustration and human insecurity—trapped in the time, unable to plan a future and thus being forced to live in the present tense, as well in space.

Even if officially closed in July 2019, the reception centre (CARA) in Mineo, Sicily—on the Southern frontier of the EU—is a powerful showcase of these dynamics at the state border. Asylum-seekers hosted there could leave the fenced and military-controlled centre only during the day and could risk losing their right to shelter if they returned beyond the scheduled hours. As the governmental centre was located outside the city (basically, in the middle of nowhere), the freedom of movement was constrained by the lack of means of transport. The continuous waiting for the outcome of the asylum process in conditions of limited mobility fed psychological distress and a permanent sense of insecurity. When I visited the centre, all the

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[19] Interview with FRONTEX, Catania, 07/2017.

[20] Interview with EASO official, Catania, July 2018

[21] On the point, see the Report by Jesuit Refugee Service (2018) 'Forgotten at the Gates of Europe', p. 20

asylum-seekers informally interviewed had been in the CARA for one or 2 years already and when asked what they were used to do during day the most common answer was: 'Nothing. I wait'.

Asylum-seekers (in Mineo and elsewhere) appear constrained 'in a temporality of little immediate future' (Mellah 2001: 42, in Albahari 2015), with uncertainties about their legal status, willingness to forget the past, and desire to get on and find a job. As an asylum-seeker in Mineo told me: 'I want to forget Libya. That's a hell that cannot be recounted with words […]. In this centre I am ok, but I feel my life has been put on hold. I just want to go out from here and go ahead'. Beyond the perception of an uncertain fate, the human security of asylum-seekers in reception centres is threatened by risk of physical abuses, inadequate living conditions and threats to personal safety. Between 2014 and May 2020, over 224 asylum-seekers died in the EU due to fires in the hosting facilities, lack of access to medicines, violence either by police or other migrants and—above all—suicide due to failed asylum claims and fear of repatriation (Table 2). These deaths are only the most visible manifestation of daily suffering.

Understanding these fatalities is rooted in exploring the practices of bureaucratic border control and the attempt to reduce the number of potential refugees on MS territory. Between 2011 and 2018, the number of rejections at the EU level was much higher than the number of accepted asylum applications. Italy was one of the countries where rejections increased inexorably after 2015 (Fontana 2019), due to inadequately trained or skilled officials, the heavy burden of proof on asylum-seekers and pressures from the EU to adopt a more rigid and restrictive approach.[22] Those who are denied asylum—or identified as irregular in the hotspots—may either remain stuck in irregularity or be (forcibly) returned to their home country, following patterns of *mobility in and towards insecurity*.

These dynamics are influenced also by the 'walls of fear', i.e. the populist, xenophobic anti-migrant discourses that have manipulated EU public opinion in terms of fear and contempt of refugees (Benedicto and Brunet 2018). The migration crisis pushed the parties of the whole political spectrum towards strict entry-controls and boosted populist far-right parties (Attinà 2019) who increased their votes in the latest years.[23] Extremist leaders such as Matteo Salvini in Italy and Victor Orbán in Hungary emerged as Europe's new discursive 'border guards'—as well as being able to influence policy and practice (Bilgiç and Pace 2017). The spread of xenophobic discourses became not only a vote-seeking tool but also served to legitimize policies of border closure, which resulted into an exacerbation of both bureaucratic barriers and maritime-walls.

The case of Italy is emblematic in this sense. In the wake of a gradual politicization of migration (Urso 2018), the Security Decree approved in 2018 by the former

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[22] Interview, Italian official in charge of processing asylum claims for Southern Italy (Catania, 07/2018); Interview, former Italian official in charge of processing asylum claims for Southern Italy (Catania, August 2018).

[23] In Germany, the Alternative for Germany rose from 4.7% of votes to 12.6% (2013–2017); in Austria the Freedom Party went from 20.5 to 26% (2013–2017); in Italy the votes for Lega Nord (named only Lega since 2018 elections) increased from 4.1% to 17.4 (2013–2018). See Benedicto and Brunet (2018).

Table 2 Causes of deaths, asylum-seekers in the EU (2014–May 2020). *Source*: Author's elaboration from the database United Against Refugees deaths. www.unitedagainstracism.org

Suicide	102
Accidents in reception centres (fight, violence, fire)	56
Lack of access to medicines/bad reception conditions	41
Violence by police, or racism, or other	25

populist government erected new invisible walls to keep out potential refugees. By abolishing humanitarian protection -normally granted to specific forms of suffering and vulnerability—it has in fact shrunk the space of available protection. As existing humanitarian permits are no longer renewed or converted into job permits, the migrants who managed to overcome bureaucratic barriers and obtain this form of protection are cast again into irregularity and insecurity. Moreover, the introduction of a special protection for those who distinguish themselves by putting their life at risk with exceptional acts of 'civic valour' transforms protection from right to sovereign permission (Albahari 2018). The tightening of migration policies in the name of fear and control reinforces also the sealing of maritime borders, as shown by the many 'disembarkation crises' triggered by the Italian government in 2018–2019. By closing ports and interdicting the disembarkation of rescued people, migrants were forced to remain suspended at sea outside the European space, pushed around and in a limbo between hard borders.

Overall, the EU and the MS practices of migration (mis)management produce at the state border a human insecurity trap enacted by a continuous series of bureaucratic barriers, the overcoming of which does not necessarily mean to escape the trap. 'Hotspot' practices are the first barrier to be overcome: those who fail to do so are either forcibly returned home -thereby falling back into the void of the human insecurity trap-or remain suspended into a limbo of irregularity and 'rescue-without-protection' (Moreno-Lax 2018). Those who manage to move past the hotspot and ask for asylum have more barriers to face, in terms of cumbersome procedures and protection gaps as reinforced by walls of fears. The rejection of asylum claims implies again a return to irregularity, in a continuum from dangerous journeys across the sea to insecure permanence at the EU/MS border. While the recognition of protection represents a way to safety out of the trap, bordering practices shaped by bureaucracy and walls of fears shrink spaces available to durable protection and increase refugees' daily vulnerability.

Inside Schengen: re-smuggling, fences and internal controls

As the Dublin Regulation radically restrict migrants' opportunities to apply for asylum in their preferred MS, many of those who do make it into the EU do not stop at the frontline country where they first arrive.[24] Rather, they attempt to move onward

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[24] On this, see FRONTEX Annual Risk Analysis 2018 and 2019.

to other European countries in search of protection and better reception conditions, family or community connections, or better social and economic opportunities. They may do so either before identification or after, disappearing prior to knowing the outcome of the asylum procedure.[25] These secondary onward movements generally happen in an irregular manner, with no documentation and without the consent of national authorities (European Parliament 2017). Migrants are 're-smuggled' across the EU by criminal networks or move by themselves. According to a FRONTEX official, 'smuggling networks are not just in Libya'[26] and most of those arriving by sea are already in touch with smugglers operating in Europe to continue the journey across EU borders. Investigation carried out by Italian Prosecutors in Sicily[27] revealed that the market for secondary movements is very competitive, with criminal networks engaging in a 'race to migrants' in order to intercept people just disembarked and offer them help to 'spring the state border trap'—to skip identification controls, leave reception centres and move further from Sicily to Europe, across Central/Northern Italy. Smuggling networks play thus a role that is not limited to facilitate irregular entry into 'Fortress Europe' (Coluccello and Massey 2007: 78) but also to facilitate movements *across* it.

Irregular secondary movements either by smugglers or by migrants on their own pose huge protection challenges in terms of the insecurities endured in transit, including the risk of death. Between 2014 and May 2020, around 617 people died in the attempt to move onward across EU internal borders. Many died also in the effort to enter the Schengen area[28] by crossing the fences built by MS in their immediate external borderlands. In terms of causes, people hit by trains, cars or tracks while attempting to cross highways (often at the Italian border in Ventimiglia, or at the French/UK[29] border in Calais) were the most frequent. Many died due to the conditions on their journeys made as stowaways: from electrocution or fall from trucks, suffocation due to long periods spent in cramped, airless conditions or frozen in refrigerator tracks where they had been 'stowed' by smugglers. Others drowned in the attempt to cross rivers (e.g. at the Croatian-Slovenian border) or the sea from Calais to UK. Some other causes include heart-attack while crossing fences, hypothermia after being abandoned by traffickers, shots and push-back by guards[30] at the many EU internal and external borders (Table 3).

While most of these deaths are tragic accidents due to smuggling and hazardous transport, a proper understanding of these fatalities requires an exploration

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[25] Interview with EASO official, Catania, July 2018.

[26] Interview with FRONTEX, Catania, 07/2017.

[27] Interview with two Italian Prosecutors, Catania, 07/2018.

[28] Cyprus, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria are Schengen candidate countries.

[29] Calais is one of the edges of the Schengen zone, with UK being one of the six MS who did not sign the Agreement.

[30] Cases include—among the others—people frozen to death at the Greek-Turkish border after being forced by Greek authorities to cross the Evros River back to Turkey in freezing cold; killed by police in Belgium in the pursuit of a car heading for UK; gassed by security forces when trying to enter the Spanish enclave of Melilla via sewer system under border fences. See the database from www.unitedagainstracism.org

of the many EU/MS practices of 'fortification' and their encounter with the practices of mobility chosen by migrants in circumstances constrained by walls, fences, temporary security checks and variable geometries of bordering and re-bordering. Between 2014 and March 2019, temporary controls at the internal borders in the Schengen area were adopted 77 times, going from being a last resort tool in exceptional circumstances to become the rule. Of these, 53 were justified on the ground to curb migratory flows and—above all—secondary movements across the EU.[31] While the actual effectiveness remains contested, fortified internal borders and security controls serve the logics of perception, providing symbolic evidence that political leaders are 'doing something' (Vallet 2016: 3).

As shown by Benedicto and Brunet (2018), after the surge in migration flows in 2015 the politics of fencing and walling developed apace. Overall, 9 fences/walls were built up in the EU immediate external borderlands (Spain–Morocco Ceuta; Spain–Morocco Melilla; Greece–Turkey; Bulgaria–Turkey; Hungary–Serbia; Macedonia–Greece; Latvia–Russia; Lithuania–Russia; Estonia–Russia); and 4 in the internal shared borders (France–UK in Calais; Hungary–Croatia; Austria–Slovenia; Slovenia–Croatia). Violent push-backs have become systematic practices to protect Schengen,[32] prevent secondary movements and deny access to asylum, with external fences—and migrants' countless attempts to overcome them—marking a space of struggle for (im)mobility in insecurity. In other cases, migrants are pushed back at the frontiers of a MS and returned to another MS.[33] The push-backs at the Italian-Austrian border with migrants being returned to the Italian side of Brennero, or those between Bardonecchia and Briançon at the Italian-French border, are a glaring example. In all these cases, migrants are 'bounced' between borders in a permanent situation of insecurity that stems not from the lack of mobility, but from being forcibly kept on the move (Tazzioli and Garelli 2018).

Walls, fences and security check-points in the EU should be regarded not only in terms of physical barriers that serve the purpose of deterring crossings and keeping people 'outside' the border. They are also mechanisms to contain vulnerable people 'inside', supporting the processes of confinement engendered by the hotspot approach and the Dublin Regulation, which force registered/fingerprinted people to remain 'locked in' the country of arrival -in the precarious status identified in the previous paragraph. This 'lock-in' effect is favoured also by the EURODAC system, as a virtual border (Benedicto and Brunet 2018) that store fingerprints, identify asylum-seekers at the external borders and monitor people's secondary movements to prevent asylum-shopping. Yet, contrary to their stated goal, these practices end up fuelling patterns of *ghosting*—i.e. migrants disappearing in irregularity—and *orbiting*, with secondary movements scattering people-on-the-move across the EU.

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[31] Member states' notifications of the temporary reintroduction of border control at internal borders pursuant to Article 25 *et seq.* of the Schengen Borders Code.

[32] On this point, see the Report 'Push-back policies and practice in Council of Europe member States', Council of Europe, June 2019.

[33] Ibid.

Table 3 Cause of death in secondary onward movements across the EU (2014–May 2020). *Source*: Author's elaboration from the database United Against Refugees deaths. www.unitedagainstracism.org

Accidents (hit by a train or by a vehicle in motorways)	164
Stowaway (electrocution, fall from truck, etc.)	188
Frozen in a track or hypothermia at the border	41
Drowned in rivers or channels	116
Crossing fences/impervious borders	46
Push-back/chasing by border guards	62

Overall, containment practices inside and outside EU internal frontiers produce a human insecurity trap across/inside Schengen. People-on-the-move are either constrained to remain 'stuck' in frontier countries or confined to spaces of vulnerability *in transit*, where, in the absence of legal and safe channels to move from one EU country to another, they are diverted and forced into the search of dangerous alternatives (stowaway, refrigerator trucks, etc.) and treacherous paths (rivers, mountains, highways, etc.) with heightened risk of death. These practices are intricately linked to MS' bureaucratic barriers and 'walls of fear', revealing the multi-sited, multi-form nature of the human insecurity trap whose dimensions at sea, state border and across the EU mutually influence each other. More broadly, the trap is the result of a specific dysfunctional politics of border(ing)s—the reform of which remains the only way out to escape the trap.

Conclusions

By deploying the concept of 'human insecurity trap', I attempted to grasp the insecurities of people-on-the-move in the Mediterranean refugee/migration crisis and the different border(ing)s, barriers and confinements they stem from. I showed that migrants are entrapped in a permanent and structural condition of human insecurity. This is co-engendered by human smuggling and the risky practices of mobility, both at sea and in the Schengen interior as well as by EU and MS crisis (mis)management, and the practices of bordering, which cast migrants into spaces of containment and vulnerability. The sequential traps at sea, at the state border and across the EU create a constant need to overcome yet another border without an obvious path to a sustainable future, trapped in time as well as space.

The trap is not just the litmus test of the spiral of human insecurity experienced by migrants. It also constitutes a prism through which to examine the various European insecurities over mobility, as outlined in the Introduction to this Special Issue. It is the concrete expression of the crisis of EU border regime in terms of a struggle over the legitimacy and governance of human mobility. On the one side, it demonstrates the EU's (in)ability to manage its borders in robust, and yet fair, ways with closures and push-backs being not only 'simplistic' but also ineffective, rendering both migrants and European citizens insecure (Bilgiç 2018). On the other side, it exposes the flaws and the ongoing crisis of the Dublin system. Moreover, whereas warnings about the end of Schengen remain contested (Votoupalova 2019), the MS' fencing practices driven by a 'not-in-my-backyard' logic show how solidarity as a

key value underneath EU project is enduring a serious crisis -further embodied by the lack of agreement on a fair 'relocation scheme'.

The only way to get out of the human insecurity trap lies in a reform of EU border politics able to acknowledge the complexities of human mobility as well as to reframe the role of borders not only as a source of security—but also of insecurity. First, legal channels of mobility and humanitarian corridors are the only responses that allow migrants not to be caught between the harmful conditions of home countries and the risk of death in the Mediterranean. They permit to escape the trap of vulnerability at sea, while making EU border policy more effective in terms of deterring irregular crossings and countering smuggling. Second, the reform of the Dublin system, the harmonized implementation of European Commission's Reception Conditions Directive and the rediscovery of Temporary Protection Schemes[34] provide a way to overcome bureaucratic barriers and the inherent spectrum of insecurities and confinement at the state border. Similarly, safe channels of mobility inside Schengen and the acknowledgment of asylum-seekers' preferences in relocation schemes (Panebianco and Fontana 2018) avoid dangerous secondary movements and asylum-shopping phenomena. Whereas the 'walls of fear' are the most resilient and difficult to combat in times of resurging nationalisms, a renewed and integrated border management based on these policy options provides a way to resolve the apparent mismatch between the '*what* has to be managed' of migratory phenomena and the '*who* is to be protected' of human security.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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[34] They were adopted during the 1990s, in the context of the Balkans crisis.

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