

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vernacular imaginaries of European border security among citizens: From walls to information management

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Abstract

Our primary aim in this article is to explore vernacular constructions of Europe's so-called 'migration crisis' from the grounded everyday perspectives of EU citizens. We do so as a critical counterpoint to dominant elite scripts of the crisis, which are often reliant upon securitised representations of public opinion as being overwhelmingly hostile to migrants and refugees and straightforwardly in favour of tougher deterrent border security. In addition to broadening the range of issues analysed in vernacular security studies, the article seeks to make three principal contributions. Theoretically, we argue for an approach to the study of citizens' views and experiences of migration and border security that is sensitive to the performative effects of research methods and the circular logic between securitising modes of knowledge production and policy justification. Methodologically, we outline and apply an alternative approach in response to these dynamics, drawing on the potential of critical focus groups and a desecuritising ethos. Empirically, we identify a vernacular theory of 'the border' as *information management*, and a significant *information gap* prevalent among participants with otherwise opposing views towards migration. These findings challenge bifurcated understandings of public opinion towards migration into Europe and point to the existence of vernacular border security imaginaries beyond *either* 'closed' or 'open' borders.

Keywords: Vernacular Security; Border Security; Migration; Europe; Desecuritising Methods

Introduction

While Europe's variously labelled 'migration', 'refugee', and/or 'border' crisis has receded from its apogee in autumn 2015 – largely due to the closure of the 'Balkan route' and the impact of the controversial European Union (EU)-Turkey agreement – many commentators argue that unauthorised migration *into* Europe remains one of the key security challenges facing European governments, economies, and societies in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.¹ Against this backdrop, recent attention in the social sciences in general – and in the interdisciplinary subfields of security, border, and migration studies in particular – have understandably been drawn to problematising the discourse of a single 'crisis' from the multiple and often competing perspectives of *both* Europe's elite policymaking communities *and* the diverse experiences of migrants and refugees in countries of origin, *en route* via precarious sea and land crossings, and in reception and detention facilities upon arrival in Europe.²

¹See, for example, Heaven Crawley et al., 'Interventions: Europe's political futures', *Political Geography*, 60 (2017), pp. 261–71; Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and Richard Youngs, *New Directions for the European Union: Europe Reset* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

²See, for example, Heaven Crawley, 'Managing the unmanageable? Understanding Europe's response to the migration "crisis"', *Human Geography*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 13–23; Heaven Crawley et al., *Unravelling Europe's 'Migration Crisis'* (Bristol:

By contrast, other than prominent public opinion surveys – which often stress Europe’s hostile attitude towards migrants and refugees³ and the need for tougher border security in response to unauthorised migration into the EU (see discussion below) – very little is known about *how* resident citizens in Europe understand, experience, and talk about the twinned issues of migration and border security in the context of their everyday lives. This lacuna is problematic not only as a deficit of knowledge in and of itself, but also because, to paraphrase the seminal work of Jutta Weldes et al., if social and cultural meanings of migration and border security are constructed intersubjectively and contested politically, then the grounded perceptions and experiences of ‘regular’ citizens – *as well as* elites and ‘irregular’ populations – are significant in shaping fields of knowledge, policy, and practice in which responses to the ‘crisis’ are made possible.⁴

Located within critical security studies (CSS)⁵ and advancing an emerging research agenda that analyses international security in the ‘vernacular’ (see discussion below),⁶ the primary aim of this article is to address the aforementioned knowledge deficit by exploring everyday constructions of the so-called ‘migration crisis’ from the grounded perspectives of EU citizens. It draws upon the original findings of a qualitative research programme incorporating 24 in-depth focus groups held between September 2016 and December 2017 with 179 citizens across 11 cities and 5 EU Member States differentially affected by recent population displacements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ‘Border Narratives’⁷ project was designed to investigate how diverse publics narrate their understandings and experiences of the ‘crisis’, the concepts, categories, and identity claims that they use in their daily lives, and the extent to which they are aware of and agree with dominant policy and media representations of the key issues at stake.

In keeping with extant qualitative work in vernacular security studies that draws inductively on interpretive focus group methodologies, the purpose of our fieldwork was *not* to test particular hypotheses or generate representative or replicable data in order to generalise what particular ‘types’ of citizens in different cities and countries think and why. Rather, thick descriptive work seeks to generate in-depth insights into shared ways of making sense of an issue and ‘the range of possible views associated with a particular subject’ at specific geographical sites and moments in time.⁸ On this basis, the aim is to map otherwise subjugated forms of knowledge and moments of contestation as well as conformity to elite identity scripts; this is significant unless academic research is to risk reproducing elitist echo chambers.

In addition to broadening the range of issues analysed by vernacular security scholars to focus on migration and border security in the contemporary EU context, this article seeks to make

Policy Press, 2017); Michael Collyer and Russell King, ‘Narrating Europe’s migration and refugee “crisis”’, *Human Geography*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 1–12; Nicholas De Genova, ‘The “migrant crisis” as racial crisis: *Do Black Lives Matter* in Europe?’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2017).

³Throughout this article we use ‘migrants and refugees’ pragmatically as a category to refer to those people who are on the move and seeking entry to the EU without prior authorisation. Where possible we work with the categories used in the sources that we analyse and the vernacular usage of these terms was an object of our research during the group interviews. A fuller discussion of this issue and our findings is beyond the scope of this particular article and will be published in subsequent outputs from the ‘Border Narratives’ project.

⁴Jutta Weldes et al., ‘Introduction: Constructing insecurity’, in Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, and Raymond Duvall (eds), *Cultures of Insecurity* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁵Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (London: University College London Press, 1997), p. xii.

⁶Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, ‘Vernacular securities and their study: a qualitative analysis and research agenda’, *International Relations*, 27:2 (2013), pp. 158–79.

⁷‘Everyday Narratives of European Border Security and Insecurity’, project website available at: {<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/irs/bordernarratives>} accessed 13 April 2018.

⁸Michael Skey, ‘“A sense of where you belong in the world”: National belonging, ontological security, and the status of the ethnic majority in England’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 16:4 (2010), pp. 715–33.

three principal contributions – *theoretical*, *methodological*, and *empirical* – to the securitisation of migration and borders specifically and to CSS more generally.

Theoretically, we identify and explore the politics of knowledge production and consumption in the representation of public attitudes towards migration and its use as a ground to justify border security policy. We focus on the relationship between the flagship 2016 EU Global Strategy and its reliance upon the findings of the Standard Eurobarometer 84 to legitimise tougher deterrent border controls. Drawing on work in CSS that problematises research methods as performative acts, we argue that a circular logic exists whereby an already securitising mode of knowledge production actively shapes representations of public opinion that are then used in support of further forms of securitisation. Importantly, we do *not* argue that this circularity is characteristic of *all* large-N survey work on the topic of public opinion on migration and border security, but rather that greater attention needs to be paid to the ways in which *some* high-profile representations of public opinion performatively produce what they purport merely to capture, namely political cultures of hostility to the migrant ‘Other’.

Methodologically, in response to these concerns the article outlines and employs an alternative approach, which uses critical focus group research in order to guard against the presumption and effects of a securitised framework for fieldwork and analysis. In paying careful attention to the framing of group discussion guides and asking open-ended questions, we consider the possibility of developing a more self-reflexive and desecuritising ethos for research on this topic. *Empirically*, we argue that such an ethos means that the findings of the ‘Border Narratives’ project question some of the conclusions of prominent opinion polls as referenced in the context of EU policy discussions of contemporary border security. Beyond bifurcated understandings of public opinion towards migration into Europe and support for *either* ‘closed’ or ‘open’ borders, the analysis identifies a vernacular theory of ‘the border’ as *information management*; this is a new insight into border studies and critical security studies, which demonstrates the value of everyday knowledge as a prompt for theoretical development in these fields. We also highlight the prevalence of claims about an *information gap* common among participants with otherwise opposing views towards migration and draw out the implications for non-academic stakeholders. With the citizens we spoke to across Europe criticising a lack of authoritative and un-biased information on migration and border security, the findings challenge the widespread refrain that ours is an age defined by a disdain for experts and expertise. Instead, our groups urge creative coalitions between citizens, migrant and refugee communities, and researchers to inform and advise policymakers in responding to the ‘migration crisis’.

Vernacular security studies and the everyday politics of migration and borders

Our theoretical starting point is the by-now well-established argument in CSS, as paradigmatically outlined by Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, that meanings and understandings of security and insecurity derive from worldviews that are socially constructed and culturally mediated.⁹ Recent work in the securitisation of migration literature has applied this derivative approach albeit in different ways and with varying emphases in order to explore conceptions and experiences of security and insecurity from the diverse perspectives of mobile populations in the European context and beyond.¹⁰ Much of this scholarship has urged this move towards an analysis of the grounded perspectives of populations produced as ‘irregular’ by

⁹Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (eds), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (London: University College London Press, 1997).

¹⁰Elsbeth Guild, *Security and Migration in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009); Heather Johnson, ‘The other side of the fence: Reconceptualizing the “camp” and migration zones at the borders of Spain’, *International Political Sociology*, 7:1 (2013), pp. 75–91; Anne McNevin, ‘Beyond territoriality: Rethinking human mobility, border security and geopolitical space from the Indonesian island of Bintan’, *Security Dialogue*, 45:3 (2014), pp. 295–310; Vicki Squire (ed.), *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

diverse technologies of border control precisely as a corrective to a more elitist focus on the securitisation of migration via the speech acts of prominent politicians and/or the bureaucratic management of issues via securitising practices.¹¹ For many scholars, such a move is not only methodological but also *political* in that it posits an alternative ontology that prioritises migrants' and refugees' capacities for political agency in the form of contestation of, escape from, and/or resistance to governmental border technologies.¹²

The premise of this article is that while these advances in the securitisation of migration literature have been very significant in terms of challenging an elitist focus and bringing the political subject of the migrant/refugee back in, a further conceptual move is necessary in order to understand the field of relations in which meanings of migration and border control are socially constructed à la Weldes et al.: one that incorporates the views and experiences of populations produced as 'regular' citizens. Indeed, to exclude citizens from a critical analysis of the social construction of Europe's so-called 'migration crisis' not only bypasses the vexed issue of the role of the audience in legitimising elite policy responses to that 'crisis'. It also, to paraphrase the recent work of Jef Huysmans, perpetuates exceptionalist readings of border (in) security as an exclusive political domain distinct from the realm of 'the everyday' and overlooks the constitutive political importance of non-elite views, knowledge, and experience in the field of migration management.¹³ In this way, we do not see the move to bring the citizen back in as supplanting that of the migrant and refugee; rather in our view the former is complementary to the latter in the broader effort to decentre and displace an elitist starting point. Equally, it is important to note that such decentring and displacement does *not* mean abandoning analysis of elite policy discourse either, but rather entails its situation alongside and juxtaposition with everyday security speak among non-elite citizens.¹⁴

In seeking to recover citizens' political agency and the constitutive role of their expressions of security and insecurity, our study is aligned with and finds inspiration from a range of literature associated with 'vernacular', 'everyday', and 'ontological' studies of security and insecurity. Over the past decade there has been a veritable explosion of interest in these and related themes and a comprehensive survey of this by-now extensive literature is beyond the scope of this article. Here we outline five key strands of work that at once we find inspiration from and seek to contribute to. Despite sharing several areas of commonality, these strands are rarely brought into conversation with each other. In synthesising them we hope to stimulate new connections as well as emplacing the 'Border Narratives' project in a broad intellectual context.

Much of the recent literature that seeks to recover the active and experiencing political subject of threat and (in)security has a common root in earlier feminist and gender approaches to the everyday.¹⁵ In this context, Dorothy E. Smith's classic text, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A*

¹¹See, for example, Louise Amoore, 'Biometric borders: Governing mobilities in the war on terror', *Political Geography*, 25 (2006), pp. 336–51; Jef Huysmans, 'The European Union and the securitization of migration', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38:5 (2002), pp. 751–77; Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration, and Asylum in the EU* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); William Walters, 'Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalising the border', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20:5 (2002), pp. 564–80.

¹²See, for example, Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond State of Emergency* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013); Dimitrios Papadopoulos et al., *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2008); Stephan Scheel, 'Autonomy of migration despite its securitization? Facing the terms and conditions of biometric bordering', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:3 (2013), pp. 575–600; Maurice Stierl, "'No one is illegal!" Resistance and the politics of discomfort', *Globalizations*, 9:3 (2012), pp. 425–38.

¹³Jef Huysmans, 'Conclusion: Insecurity and the everyday', in Patricia Noxolo and Jef Huysmans (eds), *Community, Citizenship and the 'War on Terror': Security and Insecurity* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 196–208.

¹⁴Daniel Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Everyday Security Threats: Perceptions, Experiences, Consequences* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

¹⁵Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

Feminist Sociology (1987) established the realm of ‘the everyday’ as an important object of sociological enquiry. Smith’s explicit focus was to understand the everyday as a key site in the reproduction of patriarchal social relations, but also to explore Sociology’s role in supporting that reproduction by systematically excluding that site from what was then considered to be ‘proper’ to scholarly enquiry. More generally Smith’s insights about the everyday – that it is continually brought into being through intersubjective interaction and meaning-making, that the local and personal is inextricably part of broader social and economic organisation and thus political, and that it is experienced differently by different subjects and an inherently unstable ground and should be treated *as* a research problematic – have resonance beyond feminist Sociology. Her argument that the task of the researcher is to bridge the micro-level insights into the experiencing subject with macro-level structures of which they are a part and may reproduce can be detected in much of the literature interested in personal accounts of (in)security not only among migrant and refugee communities, but also citizens.

In this vein, Adam Crawford and Steven Hutchingson argue that what connects recent interdisciplinary studies of ‘everyday security’ is a focus not on philosophical meanings of security, but rather ‘how practices of security governance are *experienced* by different people and groups “on the ground” ... and how they are implicated in, forged through and find expression via quotidian aspects of social life’.¹⁶ Thus, departing from elite securitisation approaches that are abstracted from the context in which security practices take place, the everyday turn in security studies has considered *inter alia* micro-level experiences of surveillance,¹⁷ citizenship and neighbourliness in the context of counter-terrorism measures,¹⁸ the role of popular culture in (re) producing security imaginaries,¹⁹ and diverse acts of disruption, resistance, and/or desecuritisation among citizens.²⁰ Such work has typically employed multi-sited ethnographic methods in order to access and observe rhythms and routines that are central to the politics of security and yet otherwise invisible in view of a dominant elite focus.

A third strand of related research has sought to investigate vernacular discourses of everyday security from the multiple perspectives of diverse publics. Nils Bubandt outlines vernacular security studies as a ‘bottom-up, actor-oriented and comparative analysis of the political creation of security’ on the basis that ‘security is conceptualized and politics practiced differently in different places and at different times’.²¹ Bubandt’s original formulation has given rise to a now burgeoning research agenda in vernacular security studies encompassing an eclectic mix of emancipatory, cosmopolitan, and critical-constructivist perspectives.²² This agenda, codified and further expanded upon most notably by Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, has sought to document and map the range of referent objects, identity claims, threat cartographies, and security

¹⁶Adam Crawford and Steven Hutchingson, ‘Mapping the contours of “everyday security”: Time, space, and emotion’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 56:6 (2016).

¹⁷Didier Bigo, ‘Security, exception, ban and surveillance’, in David Lyon (ed.), *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond* (Portland: Willan Publishers, 2006), pp. 46–68.

¹⁸Patricia Noxolo and Jef Huysmans (eds), *Community, Citizenship, and the ‘War on Terror’: Security and Insecurity* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁹Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley, ‘The evolution of International Security Studies and the everyday: Suggestions from the Buffyverse’, *Security Dialogue*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 513–30.

²⁰John Gillom, ‘Resisting surveillance’, *Social Text*, 23:2 (2005); Peter Nyers, ‘Liberating irregularity: No borders, temporality, citizenship’, in Xavier Guillaume and Jef Huysmans (eds), *Citizenship and Security: the Constitution of Political Being* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 37–52.

²¹Nils Bubandt, ‘Vernacular security: the politics of feeling safe in global, national and local worlds’, *Security Dialogue*, 36:3 (2005), p. 291.

²²Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, *Anti-Terrorism, Citizenship and Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Marie Gillespie, and Ben O’ Loughlin, ‘Precarious citizenship: Multiculturalism, media and social insecurity’, in Patricia Noxolo and Jef Huysmans (eds), *Community, Citizenship and the ‘War on Terror’: Security and Insecurity* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 89–112; Giles Moss, and Ben O’ Loughlin, ‘Convincing claims: Representation and democracy in post-9/11 Britain’, *Political Studies*, 56:3 (2008), pp. 705–24.

imaginaries used in vernacular speak via focus group work.²³ Initially focused on the politics of citizenship and counterterrorism, the work of Daniel Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams has broadened this empirical scope to consider everyday perceptions and experiences of a range of issues construed as security threats and the role of the citizen in resilience and the risk management cycle.²⁴

The fourth strand concerns recent interdisciplinary efforts to explore everyday cultures of ontological (in)security in the context of anxieties among, for example, refugee populations,²⁵ children's geographies of risk and security,²⁶ and the impacts of globalisation on national and personal identities.²⁷ Working with R. D. Laing's original conceptualisation of the ontologically *secure* individual as being able to 'take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and others for granted' and the ontologically *insecure* person as 'precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question',²⁸ this strand is pithily summarised by Chris Philo as examining the relationship between "'big S" security issues' and 'the closest-in human geography of security'.²⁹

Finally, the fifth strand focuses more specifically on everyday border politics. This body of work, pioneered by the late Chris Rumford, has moved critical border studies away from a top-down statist view of the border to an understanding of the range of actors and encounters that (re)produce borders in daily life. For Rumford, EU citizens' role in performing 'borderwork' has been overlooked – a term that he employs to refer to the 'envisioning, constructing, maintaining, and erasing [of] borders'.³⁰ Recently, scholars have built on these foundations in order to trace the role of the vernacularisation of borders in creating politics of fear,³¹ in reproducing gendered and racialised practices of belonging and segregation,³² and in continuously enacting notions of 'identity, nationality, statehood, and personhood'.³³

In drawing together these five strands our aim is to mobilise the collective insights in order to advance vernacular understandings of the everyday politics of migration and border control in Europe today and to contribute to each strand in mutually complementary ways. Conceptually, this endeavour can be summarised as a response to the recent call by Dorte Jagetic Andersen for

²³On the use of focus groups in the study of security narratives and International Relations more generally, see also Richard Jackson and Gareth Hall, 'Talking about terrorism: a study of vernacular discourse', *Politics*, 36:3 (2016), pp. 292–307; and Liam Stanley, 'Using focus groups in political science and International Relations', *Politics*, 36:3 (2016), pp. 236–49.

²⁴Daniel Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Everyday Security Threats: Perceptions, Experiences, Consequences* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

²⁵Louise Waite, Gill Valentine, and Hannah Lewis, 'Multiple vulnerable populations: Mobilizing a politics of compassion from "the capacity to hurt"', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 15:3 (2014), pp. 313–31.

²⁶Kate Botterill, Peter Hopkins, and Gurchathen Singh Sanghera, 'Young people's everyday securities: Preemptive and proactive strategies towards ontological security in Scotland', *Social and Cultural Geography* (2017).

²⁷Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67.

²⁸R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 2010 [orig. pub. 1960]), p. 42.

²⁹Chris Philo, 'Insecure bodies/selves: Introduction to theme section', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 15:3 (2014), pp. 284–90.

³⁰Chris Rumford, 'Introduction: Citizens and borderwork in Europe', *Space and Polity*, 12:1 (2008), p. 2.

³¹Anthony Cooper, Chris Perkins, and Chris Rumford, 'The vernacularisation of borders', in Reece Jones and Corey Johnson (eds), *Placing the Border in Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 15–32.

³²Nira Yuval-Davies, Georgie Wemyss, and Kathryn Cassidy, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: Racialised bordering discourses on European Roma', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:7 (2017), pp. 1047–57; see also Victoria Basham and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Gender, race, and border security practices: a profane reading of "muscular liberalism"', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15:4 (2013), pp. 509–27.

³³Dorte Jagetic Andersen, 'The multiple politics of borders: Images of the Slovenian-Croatia border on Istria from the perspective of an ethnographer on the move', in Dorte Jagetic Andersen, Martin Klatt, and Marie Sandberg (eds), *The Border Multiple: The Practicing of Borders between Public Policy and Everyday Life in a Rescaling Europe* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 141–62.

scholars of border security to pay greater attention to the cumulative effect of public opinion in shaping policy responses and debates: ‘There is a need to tell stories from the ground ... and to emphasise the ability people have to participate in the making of borders as well as the regulations and empowerment that can result from border activities.’³⁴ Before we present some of the key ‘stories from the ground’ yielded by the ‘Border Narratives’ project it is first necessary to contextualise these findings and so the following section highlights how public opinion has been represented by the EU Commission and put to work in supporting high-profile border security projects in the context of Europe’s ‘migration crisis’.

The securitisation of public opinion in the context of the ‘migration crisis’

While the management of unauthorised migration in the Mediterranean region has a long history, the EU Commission’s policy response to unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees seeking entry to the EU in 2015 has been characterised by a commitment to tougher deterrent border security. The key policy framework for handling the so-called ‘migration crisis’ – the ‘European Agenda on Migration’ – has focused upon disrupting the business model of smugglers and introduced emergency legislation to help Member States ‘confronted with a sudden *influx* of migrants’ under Article 78(3) of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union. These developments, together with the establishment of a new European Border and Coastguard Agency with three times as much funding as its predecessor FRONTEX, the deployment of Rapid Border Intervention Teams (RABITs) in response to exceptional migratory pressures, and the effective militarisation of the Mediterranean with Operations Triton and Sophia, have amounted to what some commentators see as a return to ‘fortress Europe’.³⁵ Furthermore, with the exception in August 2015 of Germany’s temporary suspension of the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees, the response of EU Member States has similarly prioritised heightened border controls. In Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia this has meant the erection of physical fences and border walls while for other Member States, including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, it has involved the reintroduction of checks on movement within the supposedly borderless Schengen zone.

Leaving aside the question of whether these tougher border security measures merely responded to or helped to produce Europe’s ‘migration crisis’ (or both), the key point that we wish to highlight is that these measures have been justified and legitimised by the EU Commission with reference to negative – indeed hostile – public opinion towards migrants and refugees throughout the EU. In September 2016, for example, the EU Commission published a communication entitled ‘Enhancing Security in a World of Mobility’.³⁶ This document argued for the need to strike the right balance between ‘mobility and security concerns’ and referred to a ‘powerful consensus’ among EU institutions and citizens about the need for tougher external border security in order to ‘reduce the risk of the exceptional pressures’ witnessed over the preceding year.³⁷ Under the heading ‘Back to Schengen’, it is stated that the strength of the external border is an essential precondition for the freedom of movement within the Schengen zone and that greater efforts need to be paid in respect of controlling ‘irregular’ arrivals: ‘gaps in border control bring gaps in security’.³⁸ Elsewhere, in its new flagship ‘Global Strategy’ setting out the vision for the future of external security launched three months earlier in June 2016, the

³⁴Ibid., p. 142.

³⁵Krastev, *After Europe*; Youngs, *Europe Reset*.

³⁶EU Commission, ‘Enhancing Security in a World of Mobility: Improved Information Exchange in the Fight against Terrorism and Stronger External Borders’ (2016), available at: {https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/legislative-documents/docs/20160914/enhancing_security_in_a_world_of_mobility_en.pdf} accessed 26 July 2018.

³⁷Ibid., p. 2

³⁸Ibid., p. 4.

Commission highlighted that negative popular attitudes towards migration could undermine the EU's strategic objectives and negatively impact European policies: 'Populism and racism could feed fortress Europe mentalities, undermining credible enlargement and neighbourhood policies, forthcoming migration and mobility policies, and even trade liberalization.'³⁹

Despite this representation of public opinion as hostile towards migrants and refugees as a ground for justifying tougher border security, very little research exists on EU citizens' perceptions and experiences of Europe's 'migration crisis'.⁴⁰ If we look at the evidence base drawn upon by the EU Commission to support its portrayal of public opinion in these key policy statements we see that in fact only one source is used repeatedly for this purpose; the findings of the Standard Eurobarometer 84 survey. If we look more closely it becomes apparent that there is one particular finding from that survey that is used to reach this conclusion; that during the height of unauthorised arrivals to the EU, in autumn 2015 twenty-five Member States were reported as having majority negative attitudes towards immigration and that 90 per cent of all respondents said that tougher EU border controls were required.⁴¹ More closely still, we discover that the specific question to which 90 per cent of respondents answered in the affirmative was phrased as follows: 'In your opinion, should additional measures be taken to *fight illegal* migration of people from outside the EU?'.⁴²

What we see here is an economy of knowledge production and consumption in which the EU Commission has taken a particular representation of public opinion towards migration into the EU as the authoritative ground on which it then justifies tougher border security measures. Yet there are reasons to be sceptical about the extent to which that ground can indeed be considered authoritative given that the framing of the question on migration in the Eurobarometer 84 survey and subsequent surveys is one that already presupposes and reproduces a particular securitised view on the issues at stake. Specifically, the use of the words 'fight' and 'illegal' are not neutral value-free terms, but conjure a version of social reality whereby the EU is presented as being besieged by outsiders who have no legal basis for seeking entry. In this way the chosen methodology establishes a direct link between the social construction of migration as threatening and the political practice of deterrent border security measures as advocated by some European institutions.⁴³ This is problematic intellectually in the sense that this particular survey design, relying as it does on leading questions, constitutes poor social science on its own terms. More fundamentally, the EU Commission's interpretation and use of the 'results' are problematic politically because they sanction border policies that are not independent from the record numbers of migrant and refugee deaths in the Mediterranean region. For this reason, the *specific relationship* between the findings of these Eurobarometer surveys and their appropriation by the EU Commission and other EU institutions cannot be dismissed as insignificant.⁴⁴ While other

³⁹EU Commission, 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy' (2016), p. 28, available at: {<https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/global-strategy-foreign-and-security-policy-european-union>} accessed 22 January 2017.

⁴⁰For a summary of extant research and a fuller exploration of the problem to which we refer, see Helen Dempster and Karen Hargrave, 'Understanding Public Attitudes towards Refugees and Migrants', Chatham House Working Paper 512 (June 2017), emphasis added.

⁴¹Eurobarometer 84 (2015), available at: {<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2098>} accessed 13 July 2017.

⁴²Standard Eurobarometer surveys contain questions on general, personal attitudes toward migration, both from within the EU and from outside the EU, and allow for responses ranging from 'total negative' to 'total positive' in the context of the respondent's own member state and the EU as a whole. When asked about a specific policy response toward migration this is the only question offered to citizens in Eurobarometer 84. For a critical commentary on the politics of Eurobarometer surveys more generally, see John Law, 'Seeing like a survey', *Cultural Sociology*, 3:2 (2009), pp. 239–56.

⁴³On the self-referential dynamic and performative effects of methodology, see also John Law and John Urry, 'Enacting the social', *Economy and Society*, 33:3 (2004), pp. 390–410.

⁴⁴A similar example of an elite association made between hostile representations of public opinion and justifications for tougher border security occurred in June 2016. The European Parliament published the results of a special Eurobarometer

public opinion survey designs might successfully operate with less overtly leading questions, we argue that the securitised and tautological logic in the production of knowledge in the formulation and legitimisation of the EU's border security policy warrants a critical scholarly intervention and greater scrutiny regarding the operation, representation, and production of 'public opinion' in this context.

Securitisation theory has long established that there is no intrinsic meaning to the concept of 'security', but that the social construction of an issue *as* a matter of security is performed.⁴⁵ Beyond the established focus on elite political rhetoric, knowledge, and speech acts, the function of security as a 'thick signifier' extends to a range of sites of knowledge production throughout society.⁴⁶ As Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans have emphasised, careful attention needs to be given to the methodologies through which securitisation takes place. For Aradau and Huysmans, 'methods need to be understood as performative rather than representational';⁴⁷ that is to say they create what they purport merely to uncover. While Aradau and Huysmans's ostensible focus is the academic study of security their insights are equally apposite for a critical analysis of the knowledge economy described above. Not only does the question presented in the Eurobarometer surveys already operate within a securitised framework in its usage of the terms 'fight' and 'illegal'; the EU Commission's appropriation of these findings in support of tougher border security measures constitutes a tautology that reinforces the conditions for securitisation that it claims to be responding to. In turn, these dynamics entrench a homogenising depiction of 'the EU public' as straightforwardly desiring greater border control, which feeds hostile portrayals of migrant and refugee communities in dominant media and policy discourses. Finally, irrespective of the issue of intentionality (of EU Commissioners, of the designers of the Eurobarometer surveys, of respondents to it), the cumulative *effects* of the securitisation of public opinion in this way has serious implications for migrants and refugees seeking entry to Europe.

This commentary on the findings of the Eurobarometer 84 and their appropriation by the EU Commission is not merely to state the obvious – that any form of quantitative or indeed qualitative research design and methodology carries with it a certain form of bias – but rather to emphasise that the political interpretation and analysis of public attitudes towards migration and border control can have securitising effects. Furthermore, we do not wish to be misinterpreted as arguing that *all* public opinion surveys on migration are somehow flawed, misleading, or securitising in their very nature; that is categorically *not* what we are saying and indeed there are examples of recent survey work in Europe that challenge the Eurobarometer's depiction of EU citizens as hostile to migrants and overwhelmingly in favour of stronger border control.⁴⁸ Rather, we suggest, following Aradau and Huysmans, that care is required to identify securitizing methodologies and to trace their effects when studying this issue. This is not least because, as we will argue in our analysis of the findings of the 'Border Narratives' project, working within a securitised frame renders invisible the varied complexities and nuances of vernacular perceptions

poll, which reported that on the issue of migration 66 per cent of respondents considered EU action to be insufficient and that 74 per cent would like to see the EU take more action. This was followed by a reference to the protection of external borders where 61 per cent considered EU action to be insufficient and 71 per cent would like to see the EU take more action, available at: {<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/20160623PVL00111/Europeans-in-2016-Perceptions-and-expectations-fight-against-terrorism-and-radicalisation>} accessed 3 January 2018.

⁴⁵Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

⁴⁶Jef Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55.

⁴⁷Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans, 'Critical methods in International Relations: the politics of techniques, the devices and acts', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:3 (2014), pp. 596–619. Aradau and Huysmans refer to methods not as technologies to scientifically represent an observable external reality, but as 'devices' to enact particular social and political worlds, and 'acts', which 'can also create ruptures in these worlds', Aradau and Huysmans, p. 603.

⁴⁸See, for example, the highly nuanced findings of the survey 'Attitudes towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Germany', PURPOSE (July 2017).

and experiences that might be taken by policymaking communities as actually-existing grounds for alternative responses.

Critical focus group research: Towards a desecuritising ethos

Our aim in the research design of the ‘Border Narratives’ project was purposefully to avoid the kind of securitising logic implicit in the closed and leading questions that we have considered in the case of the Standard Eurobarometer 84 survey. Anna Leander argues that processes of desecuritisation necessarily involve ‘contesting securitizing experience so as to reconceptualize issues and problems as not being about security’ precisely in order to then ‘repoliticise them’.⁴⁹ In pursuit of a desecuritising ethos, and building upon recent work in vernacular security studies reviewed above, we developed a qualitative programme of critical focus group research (FGR); this methodology allowed us to facilitate open discussions among participants in order to find out what vocabularies and cultural frameworks are operating that pertain to migration into the EU and border control.

By now, critical approaches to FGR – going beyond the method’s conceptual origins in positivistic social psychology and psychotherapy – have become a well-established method in vernacular security studies. Critical FGR analysis explores how the social construction of meaning functions intersubjectively, how it is culturally embedded, and how it is politically contested.⁵⁰ Crucially, the aim of discussions of this kind is *not* to produce a consensus based around fixed attitudes, but rather to create a reflexive forum for investigating ‘how knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context’.⁵¹

Thus, while other qualitative methods such as multi-sited ethnography and/or social media content analysis might also be mobilised to study vernacular security, critical FGR is arguably unique in that it fosters openness, spontaneity, and reflexivity among researchers and participants while at the same time retaining an analytical focus on the key issues being investigated. Critical FGR allows for group dynamics to emerge that are insightful when trying to understand the limits of what can and cannot be said at the micro-level, which following Smith above reveals facets of macro-level social and cultural discourse. As such, critical FGR offers a significant contextualising resource, whereby vernacular knowledge, attitudes, and expressions can tell us about broader dynamics without foisting securitising frames or the motives of the researcher onto the discussion.

It must be stressed that in adopting a critical FGR approach we do not deny the salience or relevance of quantitative surveys of public opinion. The former, unlike the latter, *cannot* claim replicability or generalisability and is not representative due to small sample sizes. Nevertheless, the former *can* allow for the emergence of a wider bandwidth of opinion and deeper understanding of *why* people hold the views that they do. In other words, whereas surveys may tell us that European citizens want more or less border security in response to migration into Europe, a critical FGR methodology can help us to better understand *how* citizens use and understand the concepts of ‘border’ and ‘border security’ in the context of their daily lives. As a participatory research methodology, critical FGR also moves beyond a treatment of the citizen-participant as a

⁴⁹Anna Leander, ‘Marketing security matters: Undermining de-securitization through acts of citizenship’, in Patricia Noxolo and Jef Huysmans (eds), *Community, Citizenship, and the ‘War on Terror’: Security and Insecurity* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 108.

⁵⁰Tracey Coule, ‘Theories of knowledge and focus groups in organization and management research’, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 8:2 (2013), pp. 148–62; Rosaline Barbour and Jenny Kitinger (eds), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice* (London and New Delhi: Sage, 2009); Katrina Rodriguez et al., ‘Culturally responsive focus groups: Reframing the research experience to focus on participants’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10:4 (2011), pp. 401–17.

⁵¹Barbour and Kitinger, *Developing Focus Group Research*, p. 5.

passive political agent. In contributing to group discussions, citizens exercise political agency, which aligns with Aradau's and Huysmans's definition of method as act;⁵² it also means, following Stevens and Vaughan-Williams's approach drawing upon Jacques Rancière, that 'vernacular constructions, experiences and stories of (in)security have the potential to disrupt "official" accounts and repoliticize the technocratic foundations of national security policies'.⁵³

In total, the 'Border Narratives' project involved 24 focus groups with 179 participants (86 female, 93 male, and varied for age and occupational status for the purpose of diversity). Groups were organised in 11 cities across 5 EU Member States differentially affected by the so-called 'migration crisis' (Germany, Greece, Hungary, Spain, and the UK). Fieldwork took place in three phases held approximately 12 and 24 months on from the peak of unauthorised arrivals to the EU in November 2015: phase 1 (November to December 2016) included 8 groups in Miskolc, Munich, Nottingham, and Miskolc; phase 2 (September to October 2017) consisted of 12 groups in Berlin, Budapest, Cologne Coventry, and London; and phase 3 (November 2017) involved 4 further groups in Barcelona and Cadiz. Geographically, the project sought the widest possible span in the light of resource constraints, seeking to combine the experiences of citizens resident in: 'frontline' arrival states (Greece, Spain); a transit state on the central Balkan route (Hungary); a major destination state (Germany); and a peripheral state with few resettlements (UK).

In conducting the fieldwork, we worked closely with a social research company and a team of local professional qualitative researchers in each city who recruited participants, organised venues and interview sessions, conducted interviews in local languages, and recorded, transcribed, and translated the interview material for analysis using FGR methods above. Focus group discussions were held in a mixture of venues, including hotels and research facilities, and each session lasted between 90 and 120 minutes with different moderators working with the same discussion guide at each location. We led or actively took part – either individually or together – in six of the meetings and observed two further meetings remotely via video-link. We co-authored the multilingual discussion guide – in close consultation with the team of moderators who fed back as 'critical friends' at each stage in its development – in order to ensure consistency of approach and questioning across all groups. The guide was subject to a rigorous independent ethical review and each stage of the fieldwork was governed by the principles of data confidentiality and informed consent.

Prior to group discussions taking place, each participant was asked to respond to a screening question: 'On the subject of migration, from 1 to 10 how strongly do you feel that people in Europe have a responsibility to help migrants with 10 being the strongest and 1 being the weakest?' Responses to this question were then used in order to organise two groups – divided broadly into 'pro-migration' (6–10) and 'anti-migration' (1–5), respectively – in each city. This distinction was introduced in order to create group dynamics that would facilitate open and free-flowing discussion among respondents on the basis of existing focus group research that suggests individuals are more likely to speak freely about sensitive or controversial topics among like-minded participants.⁵⁴

Discussions began by exploring the vernacular categories and concepts used to describe migration and border security in general. Thus, instead of presupposing the meaning of key terms or asking closed, leading questions, we began with open-ended discussion prompts, such as 'When I say the word "migration" what words, images, and feelings come to mind?' and 'Some people feel that migration is a threat, others see it as an opportunity – what kinds of threats and

⁵²Ibid., p. 608.

⁵³Dan Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Vernacular theories of everyday (in)security: the disruptive potential of non-elite knowledge', *Security Dialogue*, 47:1 (2016), pp. 40–58 (p. 42).

⁵⁴Dan Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Citizens and security threats: Issues, perceptions, and consequences beyond the national frame', *British Journal of Political Science*, 46:1 (2016), pp. 149–75; Dan Stevens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Everyday Security Threats: Perceptions, Experiences, Consequences* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

opportunities are associated with migration for you?'. From this general introduction into the topic, the discussion guide moved to address understandings and perceptions of migration into Europe since 2015 and the personal impact, if any, that respondents had experienced in the context of their everyday lives. We were especially interested to investigate awareness of and agreement with mainstream political and media framings of the migration 'crisis' in each country by posing questions such as 'Over the last 18 months migration *into* Europe has become an issue that has dominated the news and speeches made by politicians – how do you feel about this issue and the way it has been discussed in the news?' and 'Thinking about your own daily life, how does migration into your country affect you and your family?'. In the final segment, the discussion guide addressed the issue of border security and policy responses to migration into Europe, asking citizens about their perceptions of border security in their country/the EU: 'When I say "border" and "border security" what words, images, and feelings come to mind?'; 'Do you feel that your country/the EU has control over its borders?'; 'What is the one thing that you would ask politicians and policymakers to do in response to migration and border security?'.

Having produced an archive of 300,000 words of transcript material based on more than 2,200 minutes of discussion time it is not possible within the parameters of this article to do justice to the breadth, depth, and richness of the thematic content of the interviews. Neither is it possible here to tease out many of the nuanced responses we elicited based on geopolitical contexts and/or different points in time. Rather, we limit the remainder of this discussion to focus upon some of our key findings in respect of the last segment of the group interviews concentrating on vernacular imaginaries of the border and border security. As such, we seek to present some of the main recurring themes across groups and concentrate on what they have in common more so than what divides them and to juxtapose these findings with those elite representations of public opinion discussed earlier. On the basis of a qualitative content analysis, which coded the transcripts in line with a critical FGR strategy discussed above, we emphasise two key areas for critical elaboration: (1) how groups conceptualise borders and what they understand by 'border security' and (2) their association of 'weak' border security with a pervasive 'information gap'.

Vernacular conceptualisations of 'border security' as information management

As we have seen, tougher deterrent border security has been posited as the primary policy framework in which both the EU Commission and national governments have responded to the so-called 'migration crisis'. But how do members of 'the public' conceptualise borders and border security? Are citizens aware of measures to protect the borders of their country and the EU more generally? Do they support these measures undertaken and legitimised in their name?

All of our groups – irrespective of their previously stated views about migration into Europe – used the concepts of the 'border', 'border security', and 'border control' freely, but often expressed difficulties in precisely defining these terms and used them interchangeably. While some interviewees made explicit associations with 'guards, fences, and barbed wire' (Péter and Ádám, Budapest, anti; Hanna, Munich, pro) – and others with checks at ports and airports for 'drugs, guns, and weapons' (Aimee, Nottingham, pro) – the majority of groups did *not* discuss border security in terms of physical barriers and controls.

Most of the citizens we spoke with did not agree with the basic idea that anyone should be allowed to move freely across the borders of states, and, in general, there was support for the notion that a state should be permitted to 'let the right people out, and the right people in' (Gary, Nottingham, pro). Some participants were vocal in associating the notion of 'open borders' with a 'lack of control and bad consequences' (Bence, Miskolc, pro). Others were more pragmatic and noted that, irrespective of ideals about controls over movement into states, the realities of geographical context often means that these ideals remain as such. In Cadiz, for example, one respondent (Aaron, Cadiz, anti) suggested that the Spanish state should simply allow 'free

entrance' via the port and then 'control over the people who come in', which was seen as impossible by several others in the group who remonstrated with him (Cristina, Carlos, and Maria, Cadiz, anti).

When pushed about the extent to which they thought that states should be permitted to use force when attempting to control the movement of people across international borders there was an overwhelming urge for restraint. Even in Miskolc, where some participants were in favour of the Orbán government's hardline approach to border security, and expressed willingness to see 'guns, truncheons, and pepper spray' (Bence, Miskolc, pro), there was a general agreement that the principle of proportionality should apply. In Nottingham and Munich there was a greater degree of reticence about ever using force in order to secure national borders: 'maybe to restrain if they're going to attack you or something, but not manhandling them for nothing, that's bang out of order' (Nicky, Nottingham, anti); 'it's not allowed for Germans to behave that way toward other Germans, so it should also not be allowed toward other people. German law is still valid in this context. Self-defence is allowed, but nothing beyond that' (Stefanie, Munich, pro).

Some participants – particularly those in Munich – expressed an overt scepticism about the efficacy of physical border controls as a governmental response to the issue of migration. In the following exchange, the effectiveness of German border control is questioned, but the explanation offered by another member of the group is that it needs to be understood as a performance of security designed to simulate the effect of protecting citizens:

If you're travelling on the autobahn and drive over the border, police are there and the cars drive slowly through, they shine a flashlight into the car if it's at night, but they never really ask anyone to step out of the car. So if someone is hiding in the trunk or lying somewhere, they don't really check that. (Hanna, Munich, pro)

They run those patrols to make people feel safer, so that the German citizens for instance feel safer. They started doing that to control the borders, but it's not really done with the intention of trying to find anyone, but rather so that the people have the feeling that something is being done and they're protecting us from immigration threats. (Heinz, Munich, pro)

In Miskolc a similar line of argumentation was pushed further by one participant who argued that the Orbán government had deliberately inflated the threat of 'irregular' migration in Hungary in order to respond in a way that sought to shore up its own power:

First the politicians are scaring the public then promise them, 'We do everything to protect you' and then we will vote for them. Then they say, 'Look we have stopped the migrants.' And then it's a very selfish reason for saying what they're saying. (Bence, Miskolc, pro)

In Cadiz, one member of the pro-migration group suggested that for her adequate border control would itself 'avoid violence and the use of force. That control is necessary, and it must come from people governing' (Almudena, Cadiz, pro). The discussion in which Almudena made that comment was typical of many other group exchanges that recognised the legitimacy of the use of force by the police or army to protect the border but rejected its use to systematically repel migrants and refugees:

(Rocío, Cadiz, pro): But when we talk about controls, this implies violence too. On the fences and conflictive places, there's violence. And that can't be avoided. If a person wants to jump over, how can the police avoid that person from crossing? This causes a clash, obviously.

(Antonio, Cadiz, pro): I think that this could be avoided.

(Daniel, Cadiz, pro): This is caused by the constitution of the state, as it has the monopoly of violence, so to speak. It's the only part that can use the force in this case. I don't think this is right, but it happens.

(José Manuel, Cadiz, pro): In some cases, I think it is necessary.

Moderator: In what cases?

(Rocío, Cadiz, pro): But they are in a very bad situation, and not only with that, they are beaten ... That's not fair.

(Elena, Cadiz, pro): I think it's not necessary.

(Andrés, Cadiz, pro): They should create some type of logistics to avoid violence.

Moderator: In this case, do you think it should be authorised?

(Andrés, Cadiz, pro): I don't think so.

(Almudena, Cadiz pro): I don't think so.

(Elena, Cadiz, pro): No way.

(José Manuel, Cadiz, pro): It's a vicious circle. I am not in favour of violence, of course. But imagine our border with Morocco, we have it very close. There are two police officers, no matter if they are good or bad, and hundreds of people and you don't know what their intentions are, if they are going to run away or not when passing the control. So, a control is necessary ... particularly if there are a lot of people who want to pass.

(Almudena, Cadiz pro): That's a real problem.

(Daniel, Cadiz, pro): In that case, they should send 200 police officers to that post, not only 2.

(José Manuel, Cadiz, pro): But then we would be talking about another problem.

(Rocío, Cadiz, pro): That's the point, the use of measures to avoid that. What happens? When the police feel threatened, they take their truncheons and use them.

(José Manuel, Cadiz, pro): That's it.

(Almudena, Cadiz pro): This depends on the measures used by the Spanish government.

(Daniel, Cadiz, pro): You have to be in a situation like that to know how it is and how you will react. When you see an avalanche like that coming to you, and we draw from the premise that they don't have that intention, but we never know what will happen.

(Almudena, Cadiz pro): It's necessary to avoid that avalanche.

What is illuminating about this exchange is that it identifies and explores from a vernacular perspective the political and ethical dilemmas of border control, the limits about what solutions might be considered socially and culturally acceptable in that context, and ultimately dismisses both 'hard' and 'soft' options for responding to migration into Europe, in this case via the 96 kilometres that separates Cadiz and Tangier. Indeed, it is an exchange that reflects well one of the recurring themes throughout all of our group discussions, which was that, rather than a straightforward endorsement of *either* 'border walls' ('hard') *or* 'open borders' ('soft'), the concept of 'border security' was typically deployed by participants in a much more nuanced and thoughtful way. Instead of relying upon such crude bifurcations, the EU citizens we met more commonly talked about border security as a shorthand for a range of knowledge production practices concerning the identity of migrants and refugees seeking entry into their country and the EU: who they were, what their histories entail, why they had chosen to leave their countries of origin, and how they intended to spend their time abroad. As such, border security practices conceptualised and endorsed by the participants we met were not akin to physical tools that might be used to 'fight' those portrayed by the Eurobarometer surveys as 'illegal' entrants to the EU. Instead, the vernacular border imaginary we repeatedly encountered was one reliant upon notions of and calls for rigorous data collection and the verification of identities and intentions. Members of a range of groups spoke therefore primarily of border security as *the management of information* and crucially the ability of state authorities to assert a degree of *control* over that information management process:

When you have people going in and out of the country ... you should know what their circumstances are, up to a certain point, not to be completely invasive and delve into their private lives but are they coming for a holiday. Are they coming to work, or what's their business? (Jez, London, pro)

If we have reliable information about them, because it also matters where they come from, I have nothing against people wanting to live here because they like it here, just as our fellow citizens go to Germany or Britain. (Tamás, Budapest, pro)

The registration and what we do with the people who come to our country. And the controls at the border should be better. They have to check what kinds of refugees they are and where they come from. (Uta, Berlin, anti)

It shouldn't be a fence. It should rather be a kind of registration or reception facility where somebody gives you a bottle of water, some new clothing and welcomes you! (Charlotte, Berlin, pro)

Thus, instead of greater investment in tougher physical border security understood as the *prevention* of mobility, groups called for a perspective on border control that does not involve 'micro-chipping everyone', but 'keeping an eye on them' (Nicky, Nottingham, anti) and 'registering them straightaway' (Stefanie, Munich, pro) in order to 'identify criminals' (Hanna, Munich, pro). They also called upon their governments to alleviate the need for migrants to seek irregular entry to the EU in the first place:

The influx of migrants heading towards the UK, rather than focus on dealing with just the result, shed light on how you could tackle what caused them to come over. If you can stop it at the other end, at some point the issue will be sorted. Then you'll have the cause sorted and everyone will be happy. (Johnny, Nottingham, pro)

I think the whole thing shouldn't have been allowed by the world. We shouldn't have allowed this to happen. We should have paid more attention to the ethnic groups of Africa with special regard to their health and culture and from every aspect. We should support them in their development and in avoiding wars. (Fanni, Miskolc, anti)

Reflecting on the group discussions as a whole, then, it is striking that there were no calls for tougher border controls, understood as physical measures designed to curb the mobility of migrants and refugees. As such, this finding not only provides qualitative insight into vernacular conceptualisations of contemporary border security, but it also raises questions about the conclusions of the Eurobarometer 84 survey and the EU Commission's catchall portrayal of public opinion as being overwhelmingly in support of tougher measures to fight illegal migration. A more open-ended framework of questioning working with a desecuritisating ethos therefore appears to produce very different grounds on which alternative policy responses might be constructed.

'Weak' border security as an information gap

We have seen that vernacular conceptualisations of border security often frame it in terms of a state's ability to manage and control information about movement into and within a given territory. Three related themes emerge across our groups stemming from this central insight: (1) that 'weak' border security is perceived in the absence of such information; (2) that even if authorities possess such information it needs to be communicated to and accepted by citizens in order to avoid perceptions of 'weakness'; and (3) that further insecurities may be generated if the kind of information that is in circulation about migration and border security is perceived not to be trustworthy. Taken together, we refer to these issues as a widespread 'information gap' identified throughout our fieldwork.

A perception among participants in all of the groups was that weak or non-existent border security was a critical issue facing the whole of the EU, which in general was characterised as 'impotent' (Hungary, Janos, pro), 'poorly managed' (UK, Emily, pro), and, echoing arguments made by Brexiteers in the context of the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership, 'out of control' (UK, Paul, pro). The corollary of the conceptualisation of border security as information management is that weak border security was primarily associated with the inability of the state

to check the identities of populations on the move. There was a general perception in Thessaloniki, for example, that Greece had little or no ability to gather and analyse data about people on the move: 'Data identification. In Germany everything is chipped. One friend of mine living there told me about how everything is so under control. Here we like a jungle. No identification, who is who, believing that by holding an ID we have proof about everything' (Greece, Alexandra, pro).

This perceived lack of information about human mobility – both in terms of a belief that national governments did not know who was in their country *and* their inability to communicate basic facts about the 'migration crisis' – was one of the most consistent narratives we encountered. Such an information gap generated considerable insecurities that were expressed about where to obtain accessible, authoritative, and reliable knowledge in order to: (1) inform individuals' own views and opinions on migration and (2) assess governments' performance in terms of border security and the successful integration of migrants and refugees. Members of pro- and anti-migration focus groups expressed a general distrust of governments for manipulating the issue, which, in turn, was associated with a breakdown in trust and the cultivation of conditions suited to the rise of xenophobia and right-wing populism across the EU:

(Daniel, Cadiz, pro): It's happening again what happened in 1939. It's the same story.

(Rocio, Cadiz, pro): Yes. It is repeating itself.

(Daniel, Cadiz, pro): The current world is 'declining' in general. And eventually they put people against each other and we fight. And they are creating an xenophobia feeling about people.

(Antonio, Cadiz, pro): That's what's happening in France with Le Pen. They have created a discourse and blame immigrants with all the problems they have. And the same with Catalonia and their independence. There is a group of politicians who have created a breeding ground and many people have believed them.

(Almudena, Cadiz, pro): Now everyone has access to social networks, and everyone can give their opinion, and this increases the problem.

There was a persistent complaint that politicians and governments did not accurately represent the views and positions of EU citizens and that they either mismanaged migration or sought to capitalise upon it for political gain: 'I feel threatened and my world view being a European has been unravelled. But it has less to do with the people who come here than with the fact how Europe deals with it' (Stefanie, Berlin, pro).

Similarly, pro *and* anti groups were all highly critical – albeit sometimes in different ways – of the mediation of the 'crisis'. News agencies were widely considered to have sensationalised the crisis and some participants even speculated as to whether certain scenes had been deliberately staged in order to achieve maximum impact. A lack of nuance was also typically detected with tendencies in the mainstream press towards either 'sugar coating' or 'scapegoating':

I think some stories are just blown out of all proportion, especially in things like the Sun and the Mail. For example, with asylum seekers, give them a flat like or a council flat instead of like an English speaking person, they get crazy front page headlines. (Paul, London, pro)

I think the public's perception, rightfully so, is negative because that's what we're fed through social media, through the news. Good news doesn't sell, so they will look for the most horrific harrowing stories to get that shock factor. (Laura, Coventry, anti)

But I think you only hear the negative examples. I think from all the 100 per cent, there are maybe 5 per cent that get that negative attention. Those 5 per cent are shown in the news and therefore, everyone complains about how bad the refugees are, when most of them really try. (Olivia, Cologne, pro)

Among pro-migration groups was a particular emphasis on the massified imagery associated with mainstream media coverage of ‘irregular’ arrivals at Mediterranean entry points and what some considered to be the problematic absence of a commitment to featuring individualised narratives and personal stories. Pro-migration participants also voiced criticism of media bias in the wake of terrorist incidents in Europe and the 2015/2016 New Year’s Eve celebration in Cologne where hundreds of women reported having been sexually assaulted by male perpetrators of ‘Arab or North African appearance’:

I think when you see all these things on the news like the Bataclan bombing and then we’ve had bombings in London, and it’s highlighted by the media, and it raises public awareness, and people think that’s not what Britain’s about And I think people do become more racist when they see things like that, because it’s in their face. If it wasn’t in their face as much maybe they wouldn’t. (Dave, Coventry, pro)

There was an interesting change. At the beginning, the euphoria was great. Well, for me Cologne was most present, especially from my perspective. The feministic nihilism was shaped by this. A lot has happened there, which also has led to this negative image. ... the media ... took quite some effort that a specific image is created, especially from male immigrants. (Stefanie, Berlin, pro)

Equally, anti-migration groups called into question the veracity of scenes later on in the ‘crisis’ such as the controversial depiction and circulation of images of the lifeless body of Alain Kurdi, the five-year-old Syrian refugee washed up on the shores of a Turkish holiday resort. There was a strong sense among pro- and anti-migration groups alike that the media was either not telling the whole story, or manipulating facts on the ground in a positive or negative direction. As one participant in Cologne put it, ‘The media tell you only a part of what actually happened. I have many friends at the police and the federal police force therefore I know how many things really happened. The media keeps many secrets from us’ (Frank, Cologne, anti). What is common to both ‘sides’, therefore, is an absence of trusted and authoritative sources of vernacular knowledge. This lacuna then leads to greater scope for rumour, speculation, and ultimately inaccurate or misleading information to fill the gaps:

I think neutrality is missing, they [the media] always give an opinion. Or they try that the people feel bad about it. There comes always a connotation with it. They should deliver the information in a neutral way, so every person could make his own opinion. And people could also discuss in an active way and come to constructive solutions. (Dennis, Berlin, anti)

I think they [politicians] are lying. They are only saying what we want to hear. A good example was the TV debate [between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her challenger SPD chairman Martin Schulz in the run-up to the 2017 Federal elections], I didn’t see it but one journalist said that it was rather a duet than a debate. And in a lot of cases, they make a lot of promises prior to an election, which are not being kept afterwards. And that is fact. (Britta, Cologne, pro)

The impact of social media, online communication, and so-called ‘fake news’ was also problematised in this context.

The danger is that through digitalisation that it is easy to get in touch with information that is not true. I was in Iran for two years ago and I met an academic person, well-educated and speaking English fluently. He was convinced that in Germany, everyone gets sponsored half of a Mercedes for his 18th birthday. (Christian, Berlin, pro)

Many fake news have been used again and again. They never corrected it afterwards. (Charlotte, Berlin, pro)

When we asked our participants what they wanted policymakers to do differently in response to the ‘migration crisis’ we found that, in addition to calls for EU governments to take greater responsibility and to cooperate more fully on the issues, citizens want better access to trusted sources of information in order to allow them to make their own informed assessments about migration and border security: ‘What I find difficult is to find the truth’ (Daniel, Cologne, pro). We were also confronted by challenges to academic researchers to do more to analyse what the needs of migrants are, how they can be better supported from an integration perspective, and what they need from citizens in order to thrive in common. A qualitative, participatory research agenda working with a desecuritisising ethos can contribute to addressing this information gap; as one focus group participant in Barcelona noted: ‘I haven’t changed my mind, but I have more information’ (Manuela, Barcelona, pro). In the final analysis, messages like these challenge dominant representations of ours as an age supposedly marked by the rise of populism, the political sway of ‘fake news’, and the widespread disdain for experts and expertise.

Conclusion: Actually-existing alternative border imaginaries

Border security and migration into the EU are topics of daily conversation among EU citizens. These topics shape citizens’ perceptions of self-identity and security, and that of their communities, nations, and indeed the EU at large. In turn, these perceptions inform everyday routines and behaviours such as where people shop, how they spend their leisure time, and why they choose certain modes of transport and routes to and from work. Yet despite the centrality of these dynamics in shaping the field of relations in which issues are framed, policy responses are made, and government and media messages are consumed, very little is known about how diverse publics are understanding and negotiating these dynamics and how this activity is also shaping Europe’s political futures.

While prominent opinion polls such as the Standard Eurobarometer 84 imply that EU citizens have been overwhelmingly hostile to migrants and refugees and thus supportive of tougher border security, our findings paint a more complex and ambivalent picture. Despite our efforts to adopt a non-securitising ethos in conducting group discussions, conversations about migration into the EU were often couched by individual participants in the securitised language of threats – to national stability, economic well-being, and personal safety. However, there were also a number of countervailing narratives, which were often voiced by the same individuals who had said that they felt threatened by migrants and refugees in different ways. Alongside an association between ‘migration’ and ‘threat’ were reflections about the positive effects of migration on societies and economies, the ethical obligations of host societies, and expressions of solidarity with those on the move. These counter-narratives are important because they give rise to an actually-existing alternative ground on which policy responses to migration into the EU might be developed.

Alongside articulations of threats to societal security, a number of participants also spoke openly about greater ethnic and cultural diversity as a progressive force in their respective geographical contexts. For some interviewees in Miskolc, for example, migrants were associated with ‘dancing, creative and visual arts, and food’ (Reka, Miskolc, pro), which give rise to a more ‘colourful culture ... different from ours’ (Bence, Miskolc, pro). Such diversity, even in groups categorized as ‘anti’, was seen by some in Nottingham as ‘a positive thing’ (Jill, Nottingham, anti) because ‘people are learning about everyone and their different ways of life’ (Stuart, Nottingham, anti). These refusals of the straightforward link between migration and security also manifested themselves in a range of statements in support of migrant and refugee communities and initiatives. Some of these were clustered around the reallocation of government spending on deterrent border security measures towards more rights-based approaches. One interviewee in Miskolc, for example, commented that, instead of building walls and funding the recent referendum campaign, the Hungarian government could have ‘literally helped a lot of people, a lot more’ (Attila, Miskolc, pro). Others across the groups expressed support for finding ways of assisting undocumented

migrants in particular: by improving conditions in the context of their journeys to Europe (Heinz, Munich, pro); by creating legal crossings via land instead of exposing them to lethal conditions on the Mediterranean (Anton, Munich, anti); and helping them to obtain ‘documentation’ that would allow them to work legally once in Europe (Johnny, Adam, Nottingham, pro).

In response to questions concerning whether participants feel any sense of personal obligation to migrants seeking entry to Europe, there were a number of participants – particularly in the Miskolc group – who rejected the notion that they should do more to assist, as captured in this exchange:

(Fanni, Miskolc, anti): Well, had I asked them to come? Then please come over to me, and be here with me, then I do feel responsible for you. But because I didn't ask them to come, I didn't ask these people to come, it is not Europe that asked these people to come, so Europe is not responsible whether they arrive here in health or how they come here. We don't ask them to come, we don't want them to come here.

(Ádám, Miskolc, anti): [Nods in agreement].

(Balázs, Miskolc, anti): We are not responsible. Why is it my responsibility that they drown at sea? Why did they start off on the sea in an inflatable boat?

Nevertheless, for many participants the question of ethical responsibility was fraught with dilemmas and no easy answers. Groups often debated the issue by shifting the terms of reference of the question from the issue of personal responsibility to that of the state and indeed Europe at large. The former was particularly apparent across both groups in Munich, where Germany's ‘complicated past’ (Germany, Jenny, anti) was cited by one interviewee as an important backdrop for understanding Chancellor Merkel's response and the flourishing, at least initially, of the *Willkommenskultur*. For another participant the affluence of Germany, along with ‘the rest of the Western world and America in particular’, was the rationale given for its obligation to find ways to assist migrant and refugee groups (Germany, Karl, pro). Against this backdrop, a number of groups spoke of the ‘importance of helping people, of saving lives’ (Germany, Stefanie, pro) and of ‘helping those who are worse off than you’ (Germany, Dieter, anti).

What emerges from the ‘Border Narratives’ project, therefore, is a rich and complex set of narratives that position the figure of the migrant in a highly nuanced way; as *both* a threat to political, economic, societal, and personal security, *and* as threatened by exposure to violence en route to Europe, unnecessarily restrictive policies upon entry to Europe, and exposure to racism, xenophobia, and forms of physical violence once in Europe. These findings do not support the view that EU citizens straightforwardly want tougher border security in response to migration into Europe; that is to reduce ‘public opinion’ in ways that ignore complex and often contradictory dynamics. Our findings suggest the need for a more calibrated and reflective approach and further work on vernacular understandings of migration and border security in Europe and beyond; as our analysis has shown, non-elite knowledge and expertise has significant implications for conceptualising ‘the border’ among both academic and policymaking communities.

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