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Migration as crisis

Céline Cantat¹, Antoine Pécoud² & Hélène Thiollet³

Abstract

Over the past decades, migration has become inseparable from a narrative of crisis across contexts. Yet ‘migration crisis’ are an assemblage of fragmented, changing, and contested discourses, representations, and practices, which structure the perception of the social world and call for certain ways of governing migration. We introduce the *migration as crisis* framework to address the contingent connection between subjective construction and objective migration processes, to make sense of “migration crisis” discourses, and explain both their pervasiveness and contingency. The metaphorical link between migration and crisis that can be activated or not, and that may or may not be correlated with empirical realities of relatively massive and rapid population movements. By engaging with migration as crisis rather than “migration crisis,” even in critical terms, we unpack the metaphorical conversions required to engineer critical discourses and behaviours in specific contexts, by specific actors, including through the work of academics writing about migration. Empirically, we focus on the European contexts in the 2010s and we denaturalise “migration crises” discourses and historicise the concept as a form of moral panic constructed daily through discrete discursive and political processes by specific actors ranging from media to policymakers, civil society activists and academics.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, migration has become inseparable from a narrative of crisis. The Mediterranean region, in particular, has become the scene of what public discourses have labelled a migration (or refugee) crisis, with tens of thousands of people trying to escape their country and dying on their way to Europe and political upheaval. The phrase “migration crisis” has also been increasingly used in the context of cross-border arrivals to the United States. From sequential and localised crises around mass refugee movements, migration crisis discourses have become pervasive as if they pointed to a global phenomenon which manifests itself differently across world regions. Yet, migration crisis discourses remain absent in several contexts such as the mass arrival of Ukrainian exiles in Europe upon the Russian invasion of their country in 2022, or as Ethiopian refugees arrived in large number in Sudan during the Tigray conflict (2020-2022). In this article, we explore the complex, contingent and multifaceted relationship between *migration* and *crisis* by linking the framing, conceptualisation, and management of migration as crisis in the media, in political, societal, and academic discourses together with concrete empirical realities and political effects.

Crises are classically seen as causes of migration, which in turn are seen as ‘crisis migration’ (Martin et al., 2013). Recent examples of Syrians in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan or Venezuelans in South America are new iterations of past crises, such as the “boat people” crisis in Southeast Asia in 1975, or long-lasting plights of Palestinians in the Middle East since the 1950s or Afghans in Iran and Pakistan since the 1970s. While mass exile mostly happens in the Global South, Europeans also found themselves massively displaced, for example after WW2 – a reality that re-emerged in 2022, when thousands of Ukrainians left their country after the Russian invasion. Despite their supposed temporariness, these situations tend to last and illustrate the oxymoronic normality of humanitarian crises that creates “protracted situations” of exile. Outside of moments of acute political or humanitarian crises, structural flows of people are also frequent consequence of low and high-intensity conflicts, environmental degradations, droughts, economic meltdowns, revolutions, regime changes, generalised violence, or pandemics - all situations that, however different, share crisis-like characteristics.

However, beyond refugee movements and humanitarian crises, migration is also linked to crises in the context of immigration, around issues such as security and border governance, cultural or ethnic identity and integration – to the extent that human mobility is often presented as the

cause of all kinds of social, economic, and political problems, and even as “the” problem. Crises also arise as the consequence of states’ strategies of migration management, thereby leading to self-nurturing processes. For example, Western states associate so-called unwanted irregular migration with crisis: they therefore aim at preventing such migration and at the same time, prevent asylum seekers from the Global South from crossing borders, further fuelling irregular migration. This strategy not only creates political crises in destination countries but also reinforces humanitarian crises and begets socio-economic vulnerability in origin and transit countries.

While the association between migration and crisis seems increasingly prevalent, migration is often completely disconnected from a crisis lens. This is the case with the skilled migration of so-called “talents”, with large parts of unskilled labour migration, with student migration, and so on. This is not to say that these migration patterns are unproblematic: they lead to brain drain from poorer to richer economies, to abuses and labour exploitation, and overall, these movements entrench inequalities between people of different nationalities, ethnicities, gender, or age within societies, although they supposedly lower inequalities between countries. But they are arguably not framed as the cause of acute crisis, in the way certain other types of human mobility are.

More surprisingly, in contexts of acute humanitarian emergencies, the notion of migration or asylum crisis can remain absent, creating what we call “non-crisis” in context of massive and rapid displacements across borders. As hundreds of Syrians arrived in Turkey in 2011, discourses of crisis were absent. Similar non-crisis is observed in Northern Iraq with Syrian refugees fleeing Daesh in 2014, in Columbia at the beginning of the mass exile of Venezuelans in 2014, and in Poland and other EU countries, upon the arrival of millions of Ukrainian exiles. Similarly, in 2022, EU member states collectively decided to activate the Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 2001 allowing all Ukrainians to cross EU borders and obtain temporary protection without having to file for asylum⁴. By doing so, they kept within the frame of *normal* EU legal provisions in case of mass inflows of asylum seekers, deflating the potential political crisis arrivals could have generated. Such strategy contrasts with the discursive and political

⁴ Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof. Source: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32001L0055&qid=1648223587338>

construction of the migration crisis in 2015 around the numerically smaller arrival of Syrian asylum seekers in Europe.

To address the contingent connection between subjective construction and objective migration processes, to make sense of “migration crisis” discourses, and explain both their pervasiveness and contingency, we introduce the *migration as crisis* framework. Across contexts, ‘migration crisis’ proves to be an assemblage of fragmented, changing, and contested discourses, representations, and practices, which structure the perception of the social world and call for certain ways of governing migration. The *migration as crisis* framework identifies a metaphorical link between migration and crisis that can be activated or not, and that may or may not be correlated with empirical realities of relatively massive and rapid population movements. The framework offers a constructivist yet empirically grounded approach as to why certain patterns of migration are crisis-producers, and others not, how, when, and why “crisis” becomes a dominant frame for making sense of migration. By engaging with migration as crisis rather than “migration crisis,” even in critical terms, we unpack the metaphorical conversions required to engineer critical discourses and behaviours in specific contexts, including through the work of academics writing about migration. Empirically, we invite the denaturalisation of “migration crises” and historicise the concept as a form of moral panic constructed daily through discrete processes by specific actors (Cohen, 2011). We show that in the context of Europe in the past decades it has become a feature of migration politics, yet is still contingent on the socio-political entrepreneurship of actors who willingly or unwillingly produce “migration crises”. By doing so, we take perceptions of what constitutes a threat (or a crisis) seriously and consider the migration as crisis metaphorical conversion as part of broader processes of politicisation at work within and across societies. We thus operate a clear distinction between migration crisis as a common-sense category and migration as crisis as an analytical metaphorical device (Dahinden & Anderson, 2021, p. 30).

The migration as crisis framework reconciles three dimensions: firstly, the empirical realities of migration flows varying across space and time, secondly, the representations of migration in political, media or academic discourses, and thirdly, the governance of migration. The latter is a central element: the way governments (mis)handle migration situations indeed plays a key role in favouring the emergence of migration as crisis. All three dimensions are deeply imbricated: events change policies and representations, representations, and policies nurture each other, and policies also influence events. Therefore, critically exploring the process that

creates migration as crisis is part of a research agenda that interrogates the interaction between empirical processes, discursive practices, and political responses. Contributions to this special issue all deal with these interactions.

The *migration as crisis* framework is productive as it configures the organising principles that guide decision making (Valentino, 2021) in the social, cultural and political field of refugee and migration governance. From this constructivist perspective, our objective is neither to forgo the “migration crisis” altogether, nor to rethink the extent to which migratory episodes do indeed produce situations that are akin to crises. Rather, we critically interrogate the way in which an episode has been progressively constructed as a disruptive process and the impacts that such construction has on dominant political interpretations of migration and migrants. We investigate the political and epistemological implications of migration as crisis in specific contexts, we identify the limits and pitfalls of the approach, and the context in which this discursive framework has emerged and been consolidated in the wake of multi-sited yet connected crises. Our research agenda goes beyond migration and connects with research on other types of crisis and crisis politics, such as Janet Roitman's (2014) analysis of the 2008 financial crisis as a narrative device that justifies extraordinary measures or extraordinary political practices. Following Janine Dahinden's (2016) proposal to de-migranticise migration scholarship, we thus do not solely seek to delineate a strict boundary between analytical categories (migration as crisis) and common-sense or value/politically loaded notions (“migration crisis”), but also to bridge gaps between migration-focused research with broader social theories of crisis and crisis making, and consider how these apply to the overall population and “non-migrantised” units of analysis.⁵

In the following sections, we introduce the notion of “migration as crisis” and offer a genealogy of “migration crisis” discourses. We survey the association between migration, state sovereignty and security that has been developing since the nineties, and which paved the way for the emergence of migration as crisis as a typical case of moral panic. We then zoom in on the European context and propose a short empirical overview of how different episodes have progressively led to the emergence of a generic migration crisis. The last section explores the epistemic, discursive, moral, and political arrangements that span the progressive construction

⁵ “to disembody this field of research from the logic of the nation-state and normalised discourses of migration-related difference by distinguishing between common-sense and analytical categories, by connecting migration theory more closely with other social-science theories (e. g. using social science concepts from other fields than migration studies like boundary work, gender theories, mobility studies, etc.) and by re-orienting the focus of investigation away from “migrant populations” and towards the “overall population” (e. g. by choosing as units of research neighbourhoods, cities, school classes, etc.).” (Dahinden & Anderson, 2021, p. 30)

of migration as crisis in media and academic production. Overall, this article introduces a special issue⁶ that further investigates the construction of migration *as crisis* across diverse settings by various actors ranging from courts to governments, the media, and international organisations.

Crises, securitization, and moral panic: a genealogy

The association of migration and crisis is not new. It builds upon a long history of migrant and refugee movements and political crises (Lucassen 2017), across changing geopolitical environments. This section provides a short genealogy of the migration as crisis framework.

In 1989, Aristide Zolberg and colleagues identified three key moments in the history of refugee crises in the twentieth century (Zolberg et al. 1989). The first is the period between the two world wars, in a context of tremendous changes in Europe, characterized by the fall of Empires and the construction of nation-states. The second concerns the aftermath of World War 2, with massive displacements taking place in the wake of the conflicts and the genocidal project that unfolded in Europe and beyond. The third refugee crisis started in the 1960s and was mainly connected to geopolitical changes surrounding the end of colonialism and the creation of independent states in the Global South, with a consequent increase of migration towards the Global North notably in order to satisfy labour needs in Northern markets. Originally depicted as temporary residents as part of a series of “guestworker” programs, the (originally majority male) migrants eventually engaged in long-term settlements and contributed to transnational networks that facilitated subsequent mobilities.

Following Zolberg’s contribution to understanding the relation between displacement and crisis, in 1995 Myron Weiner coined the notion of a ‘global migration crisis’. The key argument was that this crisis was not solely the consequence of evolutions in the nature and volume of migration flows; it was also the outcome of a changing geopolitical order and of the ways in which migration was perceived therein. In particular, the collapse of the USSR led to the end

⁶ This special issue was prepared within the broader framework of a research project funded by the European Union (grant agreement 822806) called ‘Migration Governance and Asylum Crises’ (MAGYC). For further information, see <https://www.magyc.uliege.be/>.

of the exit ban for Soviet nationals and to expectations about increased East-West mobility. The meanings of such mobility changed: once celebrated as dissidents fleeing communism, migrants and refugees turned into unwanted immigrants, understood as destabilizing Western Europe and increasingly met with exclusionary discourses and policies. In the Global South, the persistence of development gaps, structural poverty and post-colonial conflicts, coupled with rising local and global inequalities, also motivated Northern anxieties about massive mobility towards the developed world. Globalization (from above) and multiculturalism (from below) became central issues as they challenged a territorialized political order centred on the nation-state (Ryan 2010). Such an analysis reflects the *Zeitgeist* of the end of the Cold War, which paved the way for a new world order in which human mobility became the object of heightened political attention.

This also marked the beginning of an era in which political debates around the ‘desirability’ and ‘compatibility’ of migration emerged. Beyond labour mobilities, refugees and refugee-like situations also became increasingly associated with non-Western countries. B.S Chimni (1998) explains how, following a long period of relative inattention, scholarly work concerned with refugees and forced migration developed exponentially in the late 20th century. This growth in interest coincided with the institutionalisation of asylum policies and the emergence of policy concern with displaced populations. Both research and policy were underpinned by an unexamined myth of difference between “Northern” and “Southern” refugees, which reflected the growing anxieties of governments and public opinion in Western Europe and North America about the presence of migrants or refugees from the South. The relative dominance of policy-oriented scholarship in the field of refugee and forced migration studies also meant that critical conceptual issues and methodological tools were not appropriately developed (Chatty & Marfleet, 2013). In turn, this has contributed to the banalisation of specific tropes of the migrant or the refugee, some of which have reproduced racializing tropes existing historically in Europe and beyond (Georgi, 2019; Janmyr, 2022; Richmond, 1994). Such racialised hierarchies became particularly visible when contrasting European reception policies and practices towards different groups of people (Cantat, 2022; Pastore, 2021). In the political arena as well as in some academic fora, neo-conservative discourses also singled out some categories of migrants based on racialised or cultural characteristics, depicting non-Western migrants as culturally incompatible with democracy or liberal values (Cantat, 2016a).

A related debate in the nineties concerned states’ capacity to effectively govern migration in a globalizing world (Guiraudon & Joppke, 2001; Sassen, 2015). Western states felt uncertain

about their capacity to control their borders, which in turn raised concerns about some of the core aspects of their organization: migration control indeed proved difficult to conciliate with free market principles and welfare systems, while fundamental rights and basic rule of law principles also came to be understood as obstacles to migration control (Joppke, 1998). Contradictions between the liberal aspects of globalisation and the quest for migration control (Hollifield, 1992) pervaded other core debates of the time. Although migrants only make for a small minority in the world⁷ which contrasts with the “age of migration” in the previous century when migrants composed above 10 percent of the world’s population, they are understood as a disruption of the ‘national order of things’ (Malkki, 1995) which challenges the Westphalian world order, and the naturalization of territoriality and nationality. It is seen as questioning the sedentary assumption that organizes such a political order, and that shapes the othering of refugees and migrants (Anderson, 2019; Lacroix & Thiollet, 2023).

From the start, the notion of a migration crisis was thus more related to changing perceptions than to empirical realities. This was clearly demonstrated with the panic that surrounded predictions of mass East-West migration in Europe after 1991, which raised considerable fears but never materialized. Similarly, African migration to Europe never proved as significant as some observers had expected (De Haas, 2008). This is not to say that migratory movement did not increase in the past decades: as detailed below, Europe has experienced substantial arrivals, linked in particular to the Arab uprisings of 2011 and to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Yet, the perception of migration as crisis seems be partly disconnected from ‘real world’ realities: as early as 2001 Zolberg and Benda (2001, p. 1) observed that “recent developments in the sphere of international migration ... do not provide evidence of a crisis ... In this light, the widespread talk of a “crisis” appears as an irrational phenomenon”. This, however, did not prevent the crisis narrative from becoming an increasingly normalized discursive and epistemic framework.

The systematic connection made between immigration, security, and other social problems (like unemployment) should be understood as a symptom of a deeper crisis about states and their sovereignty. The relationship between migration and crisis is thus ‘anchored in the fears of politicians about losing their symbolic control over the territorial boundaries’ (Bigo, 2002, p. 65). In turn, such perspective has prompted a process of securitization of migration, understood

⁷ It is worth recalling that migrants only represent about 3.7% of the world's population, and approximately 15% of that of richer countries (UNDESA, 2020)

as the attempt to recapture this control. This takes the form of tightened legislation, as well as of an increased reliance on technology to control the border. But it also entails the cognitive reframing of migration as a threat, and the consequent reorganization of state practices, as certain policy domains that were unconcerned with this issue became involved in its governance (Huysmans, 2000). It is for instance in this context that one can understand the move of migration-related topics into the mandate of interior ministries (whereas they used to be the responsibility of other ministries, like labour ministries). In turn, the connection between migration and crisis justifies extraordinary measures, which then become progressively normalized – thereby contributing to the institutionalization of migration as crisis. Once framed as a threat to state sovereignty, migration also becomes entangled with other security concerns such as the global war on terror since the 2000s, the fight against organized crime (which has prompted the consolidation of anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking policies), climate change and in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The securitisation of migration in the context of a crisis of the state at the domestic and global level may also translate into micro-level social transformations. Increased hostility towards foreigners has been documented through surveys and polls⁸ including against refugees (Hatton, 2017). Researchers have long been investigating whether numbers of migrants, their racial or cultural characteristics or the dynamics of migration or asylum trends matter in explaining anti-immigrant sentiments, finding that measuring such causal relations is not only difficult (Pottie-Sherman & Wilkes, 2017) but also highly contextual and depending upon (mis)perceptions (Alba et al., 2005; Alesina et al., 2021; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov, 2020).

A fruitful path for investigating the relationship between migration and crisis is through the notion of moral panic. The concept was first developed in the seventies by deviance sociologist Stanley Cohen (2011). His 1972 book documents collective anxieties and far from debunking them as unrealistic and irrational, he links them with historical and structural processes across Western societies. Contrary to a simple unveiling of a false perception of reality by supposedly ignorant masses, the notion of moral panic takes folk knowledge and representations seriously (Cohen, 2011, p. vii). It follows that perceptions of what constitutes a threat (or a crisis) are not merely the product of irrationality or ignorance on the part of citizens (in which case anti-

⁸ See for instance the Gallup Migrants' acceptance index based on whether people think migrants living in their country, becoming their neighbours and marrying into their families are a good thing or a bad thing. Source: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/245528/revisiting-least-accepting-countries-migrants.aspx>

immigration feelings could be remedied by sound information). It is rather the by-product, at the psychological and microsocial level, of broader trends affecting states and societies. Cohen includes in his fourth edition of the book “Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Flooding our Country, Swamping our Services” as the last “objects of normal moral panics” (alongside Child Abuse and Satanic Rituals, for instance). The concept of moral panic is tied to the functioning of world ‘risk societies’ in which uncertainties and crises are the norm and where social risks are not bound by space and time but connected (Beck, 1996). Beck’s production and increasingly sophisticated calculations of “risk” are intrinsically linked to risk management policies. The concept also stresses the role of entrepreneurs and intermediaries. As a specific form of social problem construction, moral panics always need “some form of enterprise” (Cohen, 2011, p. xxviii): examples of such moral entrepreneurs include in particular the media and social media or political agents (like far-right or populist movements). As far as migration is concerned, there is indeed evidence that crises are to some extent constructed through specific media coverage, as well as through political opportunism. There is also evidence of a rampant criminalisation of migration and even of asylum, creeping through the 1990s and 2000s and crystallising in the 2010s (Jansen et al. 2015). Climate change also increasingly frames migration as a part of global environmental risks (Gemenne, 2011). Through the lens of moral panic, one can also debunk the contrasts usually established between “supposed separate and free-floating moral panics, each dependent on the whims of moral enterprise (Satanic cults this week, single mothers the week after) with a theory of state, political ideology and elite interests, acting together to ensure hegemonic control of the public news agenda” (Cohen, 2011, p. xxxviii). One could therefore argue that moral panics constructed on a daily basis become structural features of migration politics, they institutionalize migration *as crisis*.

From localised to a generic migration crisis: the case of Europe

The genealogy traced above has proved particularly effective in explaining the emergence of the migration as crisis framework in the context of the Europeanization of asylum and migration policy from the nineties to the 2020s. In the nineties already, the establishment of the European Union (EU) contributed to anxieties over national sovereignty, along with the EU-related economic agenda centred on deregulation and neoliberal reforms. In the same period, migration

and border control became central issues for the EU, with the progressive emergence of a European “migration policy domain” (Guiraudon, 2003). Since the 1985 Schengen Agreement, it became clear that free movement within Europe “for more than 400 million EU citizens, along with non-EU nationals living in the EU or visiting the EU as tourists, exchange students or for business purposes (anyone legally present in the EU)” (European Union, n.d.) implied the strict regulation and likely attrition of movements from outside the EU. This fuelled an ongoing fortification process at the EU’s external borders, from the most visible and spectacular wall-building and barbed wired fences in Poland since the 2020s or Ceuta and Melilla since the 1990s, to digital surveillance, the privatisation of migrant control and deportations (Pedersen, 2013; Walters et al., 2022). It also structured international cooperation and diplomatic engagement with third countries through the diffusion of EU norms and policy objectives in matters of migration and later, of asylum (Capesciotti, 2017; Lavenex, 2016) to prevent migration and secure readmissions and returns through bilateral agreements (Akkerman, 2018; Helton & Lavenex, 2000; Jaulin et al., 2020).

In this context, migration- and asylum-related issues also became increasingly conflated: while migration is supposedly a sovereign prerogative of the state, asylum is a fundamental human right enshrined in international, European, and domestic laws that should remain immune from changes in migration policy. In practice however, the migration and asylum policy-making streams are inextricably linked in European strategies. Externalisation policies, which supposedly mainly impact migration and visa policies, increasingly concern asylum seekers and refugees attempting to come to Europe and crossing EU borders. The Europeanization of asylum and migration policy has come with a dramatic increase in the budget rising from €4 billion euros in 2007-2013, to €10 billion for the period 2014-2020 and to 35 billion for 2021-2027⁹. Yet this earmarked budget remains a small 1% of EU GDP, while other dimensions of the budget creepingly contribute to externalised migration control through international cooperation.

In this context, discrete migration crises situated in specific locations, and presenting local specificities in the context of European free circulation and Europeanising migration and border control, contributed to creating anxieties over migration among EU governments and their population. Series of discrete “crises” which were clearly located in time and space generated

⁹ Source : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_IDA\(2018\)625148](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_IDA(2018)625148)

intense public debates, civil society activism and policy controversies, which initially unfolded within local, national, or bilateral policy arenas as well as at the European level and in international relations between the EU and its diplomatic partners. We argue that it has led to the emergence, since the nineties, of a multi-sited and generic representation of migration as crisis out of separate and dispersed situations.

In the following section, we explore how migration as crisis came to constitute a structural feature of Europe's migration diplomacy, understood as the external commitments and power relations deployed across borders through various formal and informal means (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Thiollet, 2011).

Migration as crisis at European borders

For example, in the late 1990s, the French town of Calais, situated on the shore of the Channel and at the entrance of the so-called 'Eurotunnel', became the site of a lasting crisis, anchored in a French-British context: large numbers of migrants/refugees, from Kosovo in particular, were hoping to reach the UK, but were stuck on the French side of the tunnel. To cater to their needs, the French government opened a reception centre in 1999 in a nearby town called Sangatte, which was administered by the Red Cross. Yet, in 2002, the centre was closed by the French government under pressure from its British counterpart, which considered it as a magnet for irregular migration. This led migrants to relocate to makeshift settlements in the surrounding areas, and to the emergence of the infamous 'Calais Jungle'. Even though this 'jungle' has been dismantled several times since then, the situation in Calais has remained a hot topic in local and international politics. It became a trope in migration and asylum debates, both in France in relation to local elections (municipal and regional in 2014 and 2015) and in UK-EU relationships, notably in the context of the Brexit campaign in the UK. It also came to be linked with humanitarian challenges, as hundreds of people live under extreme precariousness and systemic police brutality with regular police crackdowns on migrants' informal camping sites, confiscation of tents and sleeping bags¹⁰.

A few years later, and far away from Calais, another episode of crisis emerged at the Spanish borders. In 2006, thousands of people reached the Canary Islands off the coast of Western

¹⁰ See for instance, national channel "France TV" reporting on "Jungle" de Calais: des patrouilles de police mises en place", published, 30/09/2015 at 09h19. URL : <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/hauts-de-france/jungle-de-calais-des-patrouilles-de-police-mises-en-place-818861.html>

Sahara, while hundreds died in shipwrecks. As Michael Collyer (2008, p. 264) highlighted, the events increased the weight of “issues of migration control in the Mediterranean in conclusions to the major summits and offered FRONTEX (the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders) its “first full year of operation” with a “number of high-profile coordination operations in the Mediterranean and Atlantic”. The events were denounced by left-leaning political parties across Europe and within the EU parliament as well as by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which asked for stable and secure routes into Europe and effective reception infrastructure for migrants. Yet European member-states opted for strengthening border control and launched Frontex’s Operation Hera in 2006, the first major mission of the agency aiming at stymieing irregular migration from Western Sahara.

Still in Spain, and more or less simultaneously, the situation deteriorated at the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco. In October 2005, more than ten people were shot by the Moroccan police: as part of cooperation agreements with the EU, the local police were tasked with controlling the borders of the two enclaves and equipped with EU-funded weapons – a reality that has become typical of the externalisation of EU’s migration policy. Today, almost two decades later, the situation has not fundamentally changed: migrants keep trying to enter the enclaves and are routinely repressed by border guards and police on both sides, often with lethal consequences.

In the early 2010s, the Italian island of Lampedusa became the site of yet another crisis, around what has been labelled the Central Mediterranean migration route. In the context of the Arab Springs, political changes in Tunisia and Libya made departures by boat towards Europe easier than before. In October 2013, a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa led to over 360 deaths, with major policy and political consequences: the Italian government launched an extended ‘search and rescue’ (SAR) operation, at the end of which several NGOs decided to set up their own operations to rescue the migrants at risk in the Mediterranean. This raised ongoing debates on the role of NGOs, often condemned (or criminalized) for encouraging irregular migration, and on the nature of the cooperation between states and NGOs (Cutitta, 2018). Domestically, the Italian government launched an ambitious policy response in 2014 with operation Mare Nostrum in 2014 but the humanitarian approach to “migration crises” did not last long. As a whole, the Mediterranean became a symbol and a syndrome of the ambivalences of migration governance in the Mediterranean as flows fluctuated both seasonally and with occasional or

enduring crises in Tunisia, Libya, and beyond, in Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria etc. (Schmoll et al., 2015).

To address migration flows through the Central Mediterranean, the EU set up reception centres, the so-called ‘hotspots,’ in which newly arrived migrants are kept before being either returned or allowed to solicit protection under asylum law. The conditions in these centres came under harsh criticism from CSOs, which denounced overcrowded centres together with inhumane and even illegal conditions of detention (Calarco, 2023). Hotspots were also set up on Greek islands in similar contexts. In 2020, the Greek government and Frontex were accused of expelling migrants and asylum-seekers back to Turkey, without having allowed them to solicit refugee protection - a practice that became known as ‘pushbacks’ and is contrary to international refugee law, eventually provoking the resignation of Frontex’s director in 2022.

In 2015, Hungary acquired a strategic position as a milestone on the so-called ‘Balkan routes’ followed by migrant refugees from the Middle East, travelling through Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans. Most people entering the EU through Hungary were not willing to stay there, yet migrant passage grew into a fully fledged political crisis largely instrumentalised by the far-right government, in a country unaccustomed to immigration flows. Anti-migrant political campaigns organized partly by then Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, led to the construction of a wall at its border with Serbia. Hungarian politics were spectacularly defended by the EU and led to the formation of an anti-immigration coalition led by the the Visegrád Group , a strategic alliance initiated in 1991 by Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The group began to both rally opposition to the evolution or harmonization of EU policies on migration and refugees within the EU, and more systematically push for a common anti-immigration agenda (Cantat, 2021).

In 2020, limited yet highly publicised arrivals at EU borders in Greece, Spain and northeastern European borders became the locus of yet another series of “migration crises”, which illustrated the increased instrumentalization of migration in international politics not only within the EU but also with its neighbours. In 2020, the Turkish government organised the exit of around 13,000 asylum seekers and other migrants through its border with Greece, in contravention of diplomatic accords and informal agreements signed with the EU regarding border control and asylum cooperation in 2016, in the wake of the so called “migration crisis” of 2015. In 2021, the Moroccan government opened Ceuta’s borders to around 10,000 sub-Saharan immigrants

to pressure Spain over the hospitalisation of Polisario Front and Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic leader Brahim Ghali, fabricating a mini “migration crisis” at EU borders. In 2021, the Belarus–European Union border crisis built up at Polish borders when Belarus president Lukashenko sought to “help” migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East into Europe after threatening to “flood” Europe with drugs and migrants.¹¹ In fact, this prompted Poland to decide on the construction of a wall at its border. Such diplomatic crises illustrate the increasingly visible yet hardly novel use by governments, of migrants as an instrument of diplomatic pressure (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). Yet as the rhetoric of “instrumentalization” and even “weaponization” (Greenhill, 2016) became widely used, the constructed nature of these “crises” and the artificial inflation of small numbers of border crossings became less of a concern than the threat of potentially much larger flows fantasised by media and public opinions. The migrants as “weapons” trope is tied to other toxic metaphors (Shariatmadari, 2015) of “swarms” and “flooding” which had long been pervasive in xenophobic images activated in times of crisis (Taylor, 2021). The military style instrumentalization register and argument became shared within right-wing discourses and more critical scholars who nevertheless unwillingly contributed to the general militarisation of migration policies and perception and crisis making (Marder, 2018). As a result, official European organisations developed doctrines around “hybrid attacks” or “hybrid threats” represented by migrants, with no factual insights as to what exactly was threatened by migrants’ arrivals or the extent to which these constructed “threats” threatened national or regional security (European Parliament, 2021).¹²

As a direct consequence of the inflation of the “migration crisis” currency, the cooperation and power relations between the EU and partner countries came to be classically seen through an entirely securitised frame resembling other fields of diplomatic engagement, such as nuclear deterrence and threats.

More episodes could be mentioned, for example at the French-Italian border or in the Balkans. Taken together, they illustrate the continuous emergence of migration crisis *situations* in the EU over the past three decades, as well as their geographical magnitude (as they take place in

¹¹ See BCC interview: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59343815>

¹² See also the European Economic and Social Committee position REX/554-EESC-2022 adopted in 2022
Source: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/instrumentalisation-migrants>

all European border-zones as well as inside the EU). Problems raised by these episodes are currently unresolved: in Calais, or in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, the EU has been facing recurring problems for decades without finding a solution – with the result that these crisis-situations are becoming part of a form of normality. New episodes attract national and international media, political and scholarly attention as inflammatory moments but also as structural features of migration perceptions and of migration governance, notably across EU borders (Perkowski et al., 2023). While situated in specific locations, and presenting local specificities, they all contribute to the anxieties over migration among EU governments and their population and have led to the emergence, since the nineties, of a *multi-sited and generic* representation of *migration as crisis*. All these episodes are also directly related to the above-described development of European policies, the establishment of the Schengen Area and the externalisation of migration control through Europe’s migration diplomacy. In this context, diplomatic power struggles and the reinforcement of external EU borders through both formal and informal agreements (Cassarino, 2007) illustrate the connection between the EU migration governance framework and the recurrence of situations seen as crises.

Crisis narratives as epistemic and political arrangements

While all the above-mentioned episodes present the characteristics of man-made yet “actual” crisis-like situations, the term crisis itself is not systematically used to describe them. From a constructivist perspective, words, discourses, and narratives matter because they impact social representations. They also, through repetition and increased salience bring various episodes together, and provide meaning and analytical or symbolic and moral consistencies to facts and events (Matthes, 2009) – thereby ‘constructing’ a generic migration crisis out of separate and dispersed situations. Consequently, as discussed above, the representation of certain events as crisis and the circulation of *migration as crisis* narratives across the sphere of media communication, public opinion and political action (Boswell et al., 2011) paves the way for specific ways of governing migration: words are therefore not only about terminology, but also about political responses. The following sections critically examine when migration is framed as crisis, what it is about and whose actors are involved and considered of concern. It appears that rather than homogeneous processes of discursive and political constructions, crisis

narratives are fragmented, changing and contested spaces of legitimisation. Epistemic, discursive, political, and moral arrangements span manifestations of the migration as crisis framework.

When is the migration crisis?

As we interrogate when migration is framed as a crisis, or when it becomes a security issue (Koser 2011), we also explore when it becomes an overarching framework through the successive iteration of crises. While numerous studies have worked on the negative or positive framing of migrants and refugees to explain public attitudes in the context of the Syrian mass flight (Allen et al., 2019; de Rosa et al., 2021; Eberl et al., 2018; Göktuna Yaylacı & Karakuş, 2015), few have paid attention to the empirical emergence or non-emergence of crisis discourses (Colombo, 2018; Heidenreich et al., 2019). Nevertheless, a phenomenology of migration crisis discourses is crucial to unpack the construction of migration as crisis and reveals the dynamics of crisis and non-crisis making in public discourses.

An exploratory analysis of media discourses shows for example that the French press only started to talk about crisis in the 2010s (figure 1). Before the 2010s, there are hardly any connections between the word *crisis* and migration-related words (*migrant, migration, réfugiés, asile*). The phrase “migration (or asylum) crisis” was not in use, although intense political crises happened around the management of UK-French borders and the plight of asylum seekers “stuck” in small towns of Calais and Sangatte along the Channel. It is only after 2010 that the same newspapers display a progressive shift towards a generic use of the concept of ‘migration crisis.’ And it is only around 2015 that this notion becomes popular in mainstream media across newspapers of varying political affiliation.

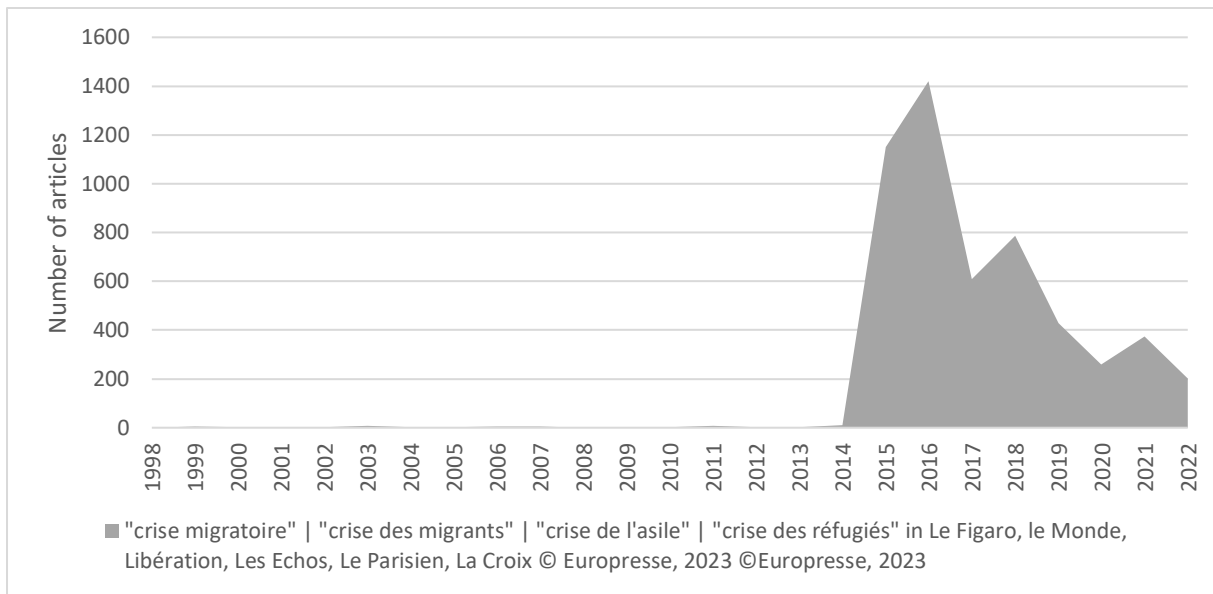


Figure 1: Number of articles mentioning migration or migrant crisis or asylum or refugee crisis (*crise migratoire, crise de l'asile, crise des migrants, crises des réfugiés*) in main French daily newspapers (*Le Figaro, le Monde, Libération, Les Echos, Le Parisien, La Croix*). Source: Europresse 2023

Turning to German newspapers, the situation is fairly similar. The term *Flüchtlingskrise* or *Migrationkrise* only emerges in 2015 (figure 2). This is particularly worth noting because Germany witnessed large inflows of newcomers from the nineties onwards, first with the arrival of *Aussiedler* and *Spätaussiedler* (or ethnic Germans) after reunification, and then with the refugees fleeing the war in ex-Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1999. These episodes were of similar (or even higher) statistical relevance, but not apprehended as a crisis (Perron & Bazin 2018).

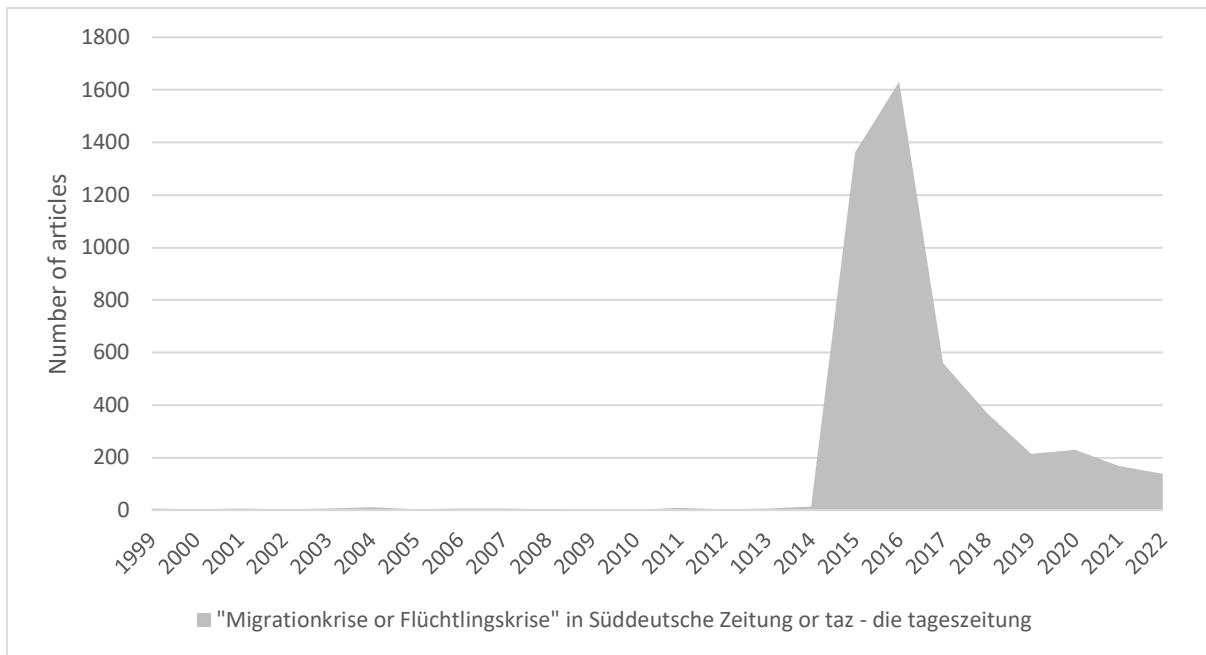


Figure 2: Number of articles mentioning key terms describing migration and asylum crises (Migrationkrise or Flüchtlingskrise) in the main German daily newspapers (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Tageszeitung). Source: Factiva, 2023

A striking commonality between these two examples is the absence of migration/asylum crisis discourses prior to 2015 and the success of the phrase in 2015. These two limited analyses do not make for a comprehensive statistical treatment of how migration-related episodes are portrayed in media and academic discourses across Europe, but they provide some evidence of how crisis rhetoric becomes dominant. They also suggest that the concept of crisis does not merely describe migration dynamics: it rather became a generic way of referring to different episodes across time and space, and thus led to a reframing of pre-existing realities. This is a selective process, as certain flows of people are left outside the scope of the crisis. As mentioned above, the inflow of refugees from Ukraine in 2022 has for example not been framed or apprehended as a migration or refugee-asylum crisis, despite the high number of people involved. These operations of (re)framing and selection are crucial for understanding the social production of crisis.

If one assumes that there is no straightforward relationship between a reality and the words used to describe it, it then follows that the concept of crisis can be used even in situations in which there is no ‘real’ crisis. The case of Hungary is interesting in this respect: as noted above, it saw large numbers of migrants in transit in 2015 but took strong anti-migration measures to reduce

the numbers of migrants and refugees in the country. Yet, despite the low number of foreigners, the ‘migration crisis’ has remained, in the words of Prime Minister Viktor Orban, ‘the number one issue in the country’ and a central feature of all public debates, electoral campaigns and political speeches (Daily News 2018). The case of France is also worth mentioning: in 2015, when Europe witnessed strong inflows of refugees, the country only received 6% of all new asylum applications in the EU; but it considered itself just as affected by the ‘migration crisis’ as Germany, where over a third of all new applications were filed (Eurostat 2016).

In more general terms, migration flows in Europe have constantly remained limited compared to the overall population of the EU or to the scope of displacement in other regions of the world, like the Middle East (Thiollet, 2013). In a historical perspective, they can hardly be compared to previous episodes of migration, such as European colonialism, or European emigration to North America in the early twentieth century (Menjívar et al. 2019). Importantly, academic discourses have increasingly grounded, albeit with strong criticism, the migration as crisis framework. Figure 3 shows how the term “crisis” has spiked in academic literature, in a way that is roughly comparable to what happened in media production.

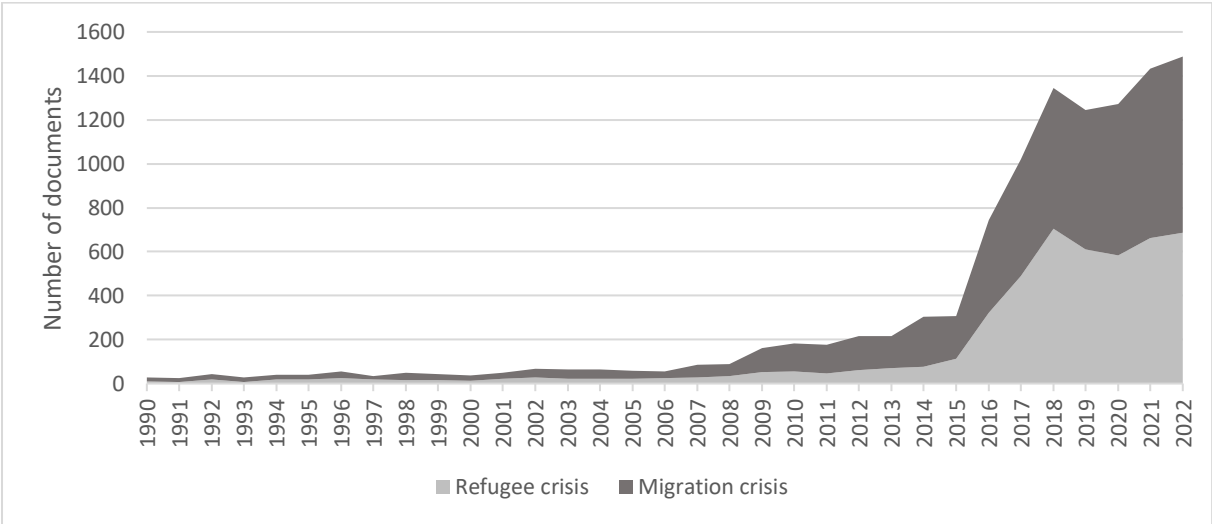


Figure 3: Number of academic documents including the terms "migration crisis" and "asylum crisis" in their title, abstract or keywords from 1990 to 2022 in social sciences and humanities (including Economics, Econometrics and Finance, Environmental Science and Psychology) journals and books. Source: Scopus, 2023

While academic research often questions the relevance of the crisis-lens to apprehend ongoing migration dynamics (see for example (Collyer & King, 2016; Crawley et al., 2017; Lindley,

2016)), it also appears to have aligned itself on media narratives in a somewhat uncritical manner. Cabot (2019) argues that this is potentially problematic, as the way in which social scientists work, and the conceptual tools they work with, then risk reinforcing dominant perceptions of social reality. In a similar vein, Bridget Anderson (2019) powerfully showed that migration scholarship as a whole fails to offer an alternative to the migrant-non migrant dichotomy thus reinforcing the belief in the migrant threat to the national community. To counter rather than fuel these perceptions, Anderson proposes to “migrantise the citizen” by complicating the migrant-citizen binary with a systematic bundling of immigration, race, nationality, gender, and class, thus shifting the gaze from “migration” to structural forms of discrimination and inequality found in the general population that are usually reserved for migrants (she calls this the “migranticising” process). Yet, while dealing with empirical data and particularly with migration or asylum politics, research and scholarly discourses are trapped in ethical and epistemological dilemmas of relevance: if scholars refuse to use crisis terms, even if they put them in inverted commas or use critical periphrases, they run the risk of drifting towards inaudible jargon and notional obscurity. Additionally, migration studies and refugee studies have been increasingly structured as professional and political fields of expertise and knowledge production that seek to impact political and social spheres, even when they stem from deeply critical epistemologies. The well-accepted critique of the politics of knowledge production and the plea for “policy irrelevance” in analytical categories therefore go hand in hand with a transformative project of perceptions and politics (Bakewell, 2008; Chimni, 2008).

What is the migration crisis about? The migrant / refugee dichotomy

After an exploration of how the notion of migration crisis gained a prominent status over past decades, this section addresses one of the major disagreements underlying the reliance on this notion, namely the *migrant vs. refugee* opposition. As mentioned above, the widespread reliance on the concept of *crisis* does not prevent controversies when it comes to more precise definitions of this crisis which translate into terminological controversies that reflect the political polarisation of discourses.

In 2015, an editorial disagreement opposed the BBC to Al Jazeera. The BBC spoke of a *migration crisis* and introduced the following disclaimer in its articles:

“A note on terminology: The BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people who are seeking jobs and better lives, whom governments are likely to rule are economic migrants.”¹³

A few weeks later, in response, Al Jazeera English (AJE) took the opposite decision. Reporting on boat migration across the Mediterranean, an AJE editor explained that,

‘for reasons of accuracy, the director of news at Al Jazeera English, Salah Negm, has decided that we will no longer use the word migrant in this context. We will instead, where appropriate, say refugee’¹⁴.

This highly-publicized controversy raised a number of important issues, not only in the media, but also in policy debates, among civil society actors and in scholarly discussions. AJE further explained that ‘the umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean’; the word *migrant* was understood as excessively neutral, and therefore as downplaying the violence faced by people on the move. By contrast, the BBC followed a more legalistic way of thinking, according to which only state authorities have the right to label people as refugees: as long as this decision has not been taken, the neutral word *migrant* should be used. The controversy thus echoed a fundamental ambiguity in the concept of *refugee*, which refers both to the ‘objective’ reality of people being forced to move, and to the legal/normative category used by states to address foreigners’ entitlements.

This debate is highly political because the overall framework used to govern the mobility of people is built on the opposition between (economic) ‘migrant’ and (political) ‘refugee’. This is clear in Europe, where governments systematically state that the former tend to be undesirable and can/should be returned to their country, while the latter deserves to be protected. In a different way, this is also clear at the global/intergovernmental level: at the UN, the distinction between forced and voluntary migrants functions as a key device in the organizational division of labour between agencies, especially as far as the relationship between

¹³ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/8/20/why-al-jazeera-will-not-say-mediterranean-migrants>

the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisations for Migration is concerned (with the IOM labelling itself as the ‘UN migration agency’ and the UNHCR being known as the ‘refugee agency’).

The difference between refugees and migrants, or between forced and voluntary migration, has long been challenged. In contemporary migration dynamics, they tend to belong to a “continuum of experiences” (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018; Fussel, 2012), as people always have a plurality of reasons to move. It follows that states’ implementation of this dichotomy is by nature inadequate and unsuccessful (Carling & Collins, 2018). Alternative terminologies have been proposed, like ‘asylum migration’ (Koser & Van Hear, 2003), ‘crisis migration’ (Martin et al., 2013), or ‘survival migration’ (Betts, 2013) with various success: while they may be useful analytically, they have no legal validity and leave the governance framework unchanged.

To go one step further, one could therefore suggest that one of the reasons why the events described above were perceived as a crisis is precisely because they challenged the conceptual and organizational routine of governance mechanisms: the mobility of people in and around Europe over the past decade has made clear that the refugee/migrant distinction is often non-operational, thereby challenging the very foundations of the normative and institutional frameworks designed to govern people on the move. Here, a crisis arises when reality no longer fits into the categories used to apprehend it (or at least when the disjuncture between the two, which never fully coincide, becomes extremely patent). In principle, such a mismatch could spur a reassessment of categories and policy frameworks; yet, in practice, this is not what happened: governance frameworks remained unchanged, making for a permanent mismatch – and hence for a permanent crisis.

AJE’s decision was criticized by migrants’ rights advocates on the grounds that it reinforced the migrant-refugee dichotomy, and the assumption according to which people on the move can be categorized as either *migrants* or *refugees*. Moreover, AJE would thereby attribute a higher moral status to refugees, thus failing to recognize the rights and needs of migrants: Judith Vonberg and the British NGO Migrants’ Rights’ Network, for instance, argued that “[b]y rejecting the term “migrants”, Al Jazeera gives credence to the illiberal voices telling us that migrants are not worthy of our compassion” (Vonberg, 2015). This controversy thus makes it clear that disputes over the qualification of the crisis are not merely terminological disagreements or divergences about representing reality accurately. The words used to describe

reality matter because they anticipate the manner in which reality will be governed: by speaking of *migrants*, the BBC negated the tragic dimension of the crisis, as if desperate people at EU borders were ‘only’ migrants to be admitted or rejected according to states’ sovereign decisions; but by speaking of *refugees*, AJE seemed to imply that only refugees were to be protected from hardships and abuses under international law, as if all other migrants were in unproblematic situations.

Another, less explicit disagreement underlying the *migration as crisis* framework concerns the exact nature of the policy problems to be addressed in connection with migration inflows and the mix of security/control issues with humanitarian considerations. The migration as crisis framework thus supports different interpretations of what the crisis is, what it entails and the type of policies it requires. To put it simply, governments tend to see the crisis as the symptom of a lack of efficiency in controlling European borders, a “control gap”. The crisis is thus primarily a matter of security, and of states’ capacity to implement their sovereign right to control access to their territory. This lack of control can then be associated with all kinds of threats, to socio-economic well-being, to welfare, to culture and identity, and so on – according to a broad understanding of security. While this is well known (Bigo, 2002; Buonfino, 2004; Huysmans, 2000), associations between migration and security are renewed by the spread of crisis-related narratives (Murray & Longo, 2018). Logically, the answer to the crisis is then thought to lie in increased securitization, through tightened legislation or more sophisticated control measures, in order to better close borders and to stop the crisis. This dynamic pervades EU policy at large and is particularly evident with right-wing governments.

Alternatively, NGOs, CSOs and migrant-led organisations typically put forward a humanitarian interpretation of the crisis, according to which the major problem is the risks and abuses faced by migrants, and the consequent solution is the immediate launch of humanitarian initiatives. Humanitarian crisis narrative is mobilized to call upon governments and the EU to nuance their security-focused policies and to consider the needs of migrants and refugees facing death at sea in the Mediterranean for instance. It is also a mobilising cry for solidarity along difficult routes within migrants’ networks (Cantat, 2016b; Cantat et al., 2019). More generally, a human rights framework overarchingly encompasses NGO’s discourses (fundamental rights, asylum, health, housing, etc).

The opposition between security and humanitarian concerns is not always so binary, however. The tensions between the two are for example visible in EU discourses and policies: although overwhelmingly inspired by security concerns, they are also framed within a narrative of care for people's rights and well-being. As early as 2006, Frontex launched the above-mentioned Operation Hera to prevent irregular migration from West Africa to the Canary Islands and "hundreds if not thousands of lives have been saved" declared Ilkka Laitinen, former Frontex director (cited by (Heller & Pécoud, 2020)). By contrast, in the context of another operation (Triton) in 2015, Frontex explained that its mandate was not to save lives or to pursue SAR operations¹⁵. And a few years later, on the front page of the Frontex web site, one could read:

Last but not least, Frontex officers involved in search and rescue operations have helped save more than 65,000 lives in the Mediterranean since the new mandate came into effect. Fundamental rights are integrated into Frontex operations from their inception, ensuring that all those fleeing war and persecution are able to apply for international protection.

These quotes reflect the changes and even the confusion that surrounds the objectives of this EU agency. In more general terms, they indicate the emergence of ambivalent situations, in which security and humanitarian concerns are conflated. As in the Mediterranean, the border then becomes the site of multiple interventions, by different actors with different logic: borderguards with their sovereign logic coexist with NGOs with a humanitarian (and sometimes political) agenda, while at the same time governments claim that controlling borders is also necessary to protect migrants in what has been called "humanitarian borderwork" (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Here, different interpretations of the crisis follow different assessments of reality, not only in interpretative terms (what is happening) but also in ethical terms (what is our responsibility and what should be done). These interpretations coexist within crisis narratives in more or less balanced ways: an analysis of Austrian media production, for example, found that 'established narratives of security threat and economisation are most prominent', while 'humanitarianism frames and background information on the refugees' situation are provided to a lesser extent' (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017).

Whose migration crisis?

¹⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/22/eu-borders-chief-says-saving-migrants-lives-cannot-be-priority-for-patrols>

A third debate underlying the reliance on the notion of *migration crisis* regards the factors that produce the crisis and actors appropriating it in the political sphere as a crisis of (irregular) migration, of asylum, of reception policies, of border control policies etc. (Allen et al., 2018) As indicated above, a security-focused approach sees the crisis as stemming from too large flows of people, which would exceed state capacities (both in terms of border control and integration); the answer then lies in tightening monitoring capacities to better reduce migration. By contrast, another approach frames the crisis as the result of an inappropriate governance framework: for example, and as reviewed above, a strict *refugee vs. migrant* distinction is central in governance mechanisms but makes them structurally unable to address patterns of mobility that do not fit into this distinction.

This makes for a two-sided situation, in which the crisis can be attributed either to external factors (namely the size of migration flows), or to internal ones (namely the political strategies put in place to govern these flows). In addition, and as suggested above, an in-between approach consists in explaining the crisis by a mismatch between governance mechanisms, on the one hand, and migration flows on the other. From that perspective, the ‘whose crisis?’ question has been answered by political activists and scholars as a crisis of states and state policies, a ‘crisis of hospitality, or a crisis of solidarity, both between Europe and migrants, and between European states (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Calabrese et al., 2022; Lendaro et al., 2019; Rajaram, 2015).

This discussion echoes long-standing debates about why migration policies “fail” (Castles, 2004). Critical research has long established that the narrow control-oriented nature of migration policies in the Global North makes them unfit to address some of the key challenges raised by migration, including the protection of migrants/refugees, the need for migrant labour, or the development differentials between countries at world level. It follows that migration policies pursue unrealistic objectives that cannot be met, which logically makes for a permanent crisis.

It also follows, in line with the ‘gap hypothesis’ (Cornelius et al., 1994), that migration governance is characterized by a disconnection between states’ claims to control migration on the one hand, and the actual reality of persistent migration flows on the other: the wider the gap, the more migration will be perceived as uncontrollable (regardless of the exact nature or volume of the flows). From that perspective, there are two variables that shape the perception of migration as crisis: politicians’ promises and the reality of migration; the crisis is the outcome

of the gap between the two - and will widen if either of them intensifies. Let us for instance recall a quote from a former French Minister of Labour who, in the sixties, argued that ‘clandestine immigration in itself is not without benefit, for if we stuck to a strict interpretation of the rules and international agreements, we would perhaps be short of labor’ (Gaspard & Servan-Schreiber, 1985, pp. 28–29). Such a statement is unthinkable sixty years later and illustrates the changes in narratives – and how these changes fuel the perception of a crisis.

If one sees the crisis as a mismatch between external events and policy strategies, the question that arises concerns the extent to which this mismatch can be remedied, according to a scenario that would see events lead to policy changes. There is evidence that this may happen: in 2015 the German government suspended the Dublin Regulation and invited Syrians to claim asylum in Germany even if they had transited through another EU member state; this was a clear and spectacular policy change, explicitly designed to address a new situation. This change proved temporary, however, and isolated in Europe. Yet a dominant scenario of crisis policy making consists of ‘more of the same’ dynamics: the crisis does not change earlier policies, but reinforces them – which in turn makes for a self-nurturing cycle – to the extent that ‘the current crisis management builds on pre-existing practices and enables their consolidation’ (Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). One may even go one step further and argue that framing a situation as a crisis is a way for policymakers to refuse to admit the inappropriate nature of their political strategies. Rather than adapting policies to reality, they frame it as exceptional. Political language is performative here: once apprehended through a crisis lens, migration is perceived as extraordinary or abnormal, which therefore calls for *ad hoc* measure rather than structural political strategies. A crisis approach thus contributes to fuel migration control and containment. It has for instance often been observed that policy responses to situations of migration crisis tend to overlook the respect for fundamental rights and for the rule of law, on the basis that the extraordinary nature of the situation would call for temporarily suspending these norms (Carrera, Santos Vara and Strik 2019) – according to a dynamic that can be observed elsewhere as well (with counter terrorism policy as an obvious example). By sidelining structural drivers of mobility and fundamental rights, migration policies merely reproduce the unequal socioeconomic and political relations that underlie migration in the first place – and thus nurture the next ‘migration crisis’.

There is therefore a deep connection between migration control and crisis narratives: both rely on the assumption that migration is not (or should not be) a normal phenomenon, and that a

strategy of strict border control should remain the norm – even if this norm may, at times, be challenged by temporary situations of crisis. This blocks the recognition of migration as a structural feature of today’s world, and the elaboration of long-term, systemic political strategies (Lacroix & Thiollet, 2023). In terms of temporality, a crisis approach de-historicizes and decontextualizes migration, by framing it as a sudden/temporary problem rather than as a core component of world history. This also contributes to depoliticizing migration, by disconnecting it from the unequal organization of the global economy (Delgado-Wise, 2014) that structures power relations at the macro and micro levels, between countries of emigration, transit and immigration and migrants and non-migrants. The migration as crisis framework also obliterates the inherent violence of political orders grounded in state’s control of people’s mobility and the intrinsically unequal access to rights based on nationality (Thiollet, 2022). Finally, as noted by MacAdams, a crisis lens ‘risks side-lining *everyday* systemic issues such as poverty, vulnerability and environmental fragility’ (2014: 30). In a similar way, focusing on migration crisis offers an easy way to scapegoat external factors and aliens as responsible for domestic socio-economic evils while pushing other structural crises in unequal societies, crumbling welfare states and social cohesion or environmental threats, out of public debates.

Conclusion

This article has sought to establish both theoretically and empirically the validity of the *migration as crisis* framework to understand the logic at work in migration discourses and policies. Over the past decades in Europe, several episodes of ‘crisis’ have fed beliefs that human mobility makes for destabilizing situations in which states find themselves unable to control their borders, putting societies at risk. While reliance on a crisis framework is not correlated to the actual number of people on the move, the migration as crisis framework calls for denaturalizing crisis discourses, empirically locating them, and explains how, in certain contexts, migration flows become perceived as such while in others they do not. Our framework also calls for investigating the grey zones or epistemic and moral arrangements in the definition of what exactly constitutes a crisis beyond migration. These arrangements crystallise along politically constructed dichotomies such as the migrant/refugee one, and along the oppositions between moral conceptions of what constitutes a crisis. They also help to elucidate the discursive divide between those who explain the crisis by external events (like the arrival of

migrants) and those who emphasize the role of migration policies in (mis)managing migration and the manufacturing of crises, thus introducing a debate on the politics of responsibility. Contributions assembled in this special issue do not only feed rich empirical and political conversations about migration governance, but also offer explorations of the validity and heuristics of the migration as crisis framework.

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