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“I Thank Greece for Being Our European Shield”: Von Der Leyen Commission’s Spatial Imaginations during the Turkish-Greek Border Crisis in March 2020

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the spatial imaginations of the European Commission’s response to the Turkish-Greek border crisis in March 2020. The goal is to unpack the discursive dynamics of space using a critical geopolitical perspective that treats space as a constructed social category. To that end, the Commission’s official statements and policies on the crisis are deconstructed in terms of territoriality, securitization, and identity. The article advances the argument that increased political pressure and the influx of refugees from Turkey triggered a reflex reserved for nation-states, resulting in the European Union flexing its geopolitical muscles. In these practices, Turkey has served as the constitutive other of European space by representing the outside, insecure, and distant.

Keywords: Migration, Critical Geopolitics, Pazarkule, Space, Identity

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Introduction

Thousands of refugees¹ approached the Greek border seeking to access the European space after Turkish authorities announced² on February 27, 2020, that the country’s borders with the European Union (EU) would be opened for passage. This was the largest migration flow to Europe since a deal was struck on March 18, 2016, in which Turkey had agreed to control irregular border crossings to Greek islands in exchange for financial and political benefits from the EU. In scenes reminiscent of the 2015 mass irregular migration through Turkey’s western

- 1 According to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the term “refugee” refers to people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and crossed an international border in search of safety in another country. Recognizing the distinction between being a refugee and having “refugee status,” this study employs “refugee” as a generic term to refer to all individuals fleeing the Syrian Civil War, temporarily living in Turkey, and attempting to enter European territory, regardless of their legal recognized status in any of the states in question.
- 2 Zia Weise, “Turkey says it will no longer stop refugees from entering Europe”, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-says-it-will-no-longer-stop-refugees-from-entering-europe/> (Accessed November 2022); Reuters Staff, “Turkey will no longer stop Syrian migrant flow to Europe: Turkish official”, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-migrants/turkey-will-no-longer-stop-syrian-migrant-flow-to-europe-turkish-official-idUSKCN20L33V> (Accessed November 2022).

borders to the EU, the influx of refugees quickly escalated into a border crisis involving Turkey, Greece, and the EU with geopolitical spatial implications.

Upon entering office in 2019, President Ursula von der Leyen presented her team as a “geopolitical Commission.” This was a clear indication of the EU’s pivot towards geopolitics, as it sought a more strategic position in a world marked by increasing rivalry and decreasing multilateralism. Although the tenets of a geopolitical EU remained unclear, von der Leyen described her vision as follows: “My Commission will not be afraid to speak the language of confidence. But it will be our way, the European way.”³ This, in turn, signaled the Commission’s endeavor for stronger coordination among the member states on the EU’s external relations along with a reinforcement of collective identity in foreign policy. Given the Commission’s limited role in foreign policy, von der Leyen’s proposal for a geopolitical Commission is a puzzling task. At this point, understanding how and in what ways the Commission promotes a geopolitical EU appears to be a worthwhile pursuit. This study aims to contribute to this debate by providing a critical perspective on the Commission’s geopolitical imaginations and identities through a deconstruction of its visions of space during the March 2020 crisis at the Turkish-Greek border. It seeks to answer how high-level European Commission executives discursively construct European space in response to the refugee influx into Greece following Turkish President Erdoğan’s announcement to open the Greek-Turkish border, which Turkey was tasked with protecting from irregular crossings under the 2016 EU-Turkey statement.

The analysis follows the spatial turn in International Relations (IR) and employs a critical geopolitical framework that treats space as relational, dynamic, and socially constructed. The language used by political leaders and officials to construct and represent global affairs, including key locations, players, and strategies,⁴ serves as the main source for studying actors’ imagined spatial positioning and the shifting boundaries accompanying this positioning⁵ by producing power relations, identity, and otherness. I have compiled the document corpus by searching for press releases, statements and speeches, and daily news containing the keywords ‘Turkey’, ‘refugee’, and ‘Greece’ on the official website of the European Commission between February and December 2020. A total of 15 official documents of the von der Leyen Commission during and after the border crisis obtained in this manner are scrutinized to reveal how the European Commission reflects on a spatial imagination for the EU by imposing itself forcefully on border and migration control with the Action Plan of support for Greece and the official statements on the crisis. The article argues that increased political pressure and the influx of refugees from Turkey triggered a reflex reserved for nation-states, resulting in the EU flexing its geopolitical muscles. This process is underpinned by three discursive dynamics: hardening of EU borders coupled with construction of an external threat, identity formation to call for European unity, and positioning of Turkey as a neighbor.

3 Von der Leyen quoted in European Commission, “Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the Occasion of the Presentation of Her College of Commissioners and Their Programme”, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6408 (Accessed 27 April 2022).

4 Gearóid O’Tuathail, Theorizing practical geopolitical reasoning: The case of the United States response to the war in Bosnia. *Political Geography*, 2002, Vol.21, No 5, p.607.

5 Martin Müller, Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics: Towards discourse as language and practice. *Political Geography*, Vol.27, No 3, 2008, p.322–338.

The Spatial Turn in IR and Rethinking the European Space

The spatial turn in IR challenges conventionally taken-for-granted concepts of space, borders, and territory. In contrast to conventional IR theories that treat territoriality “as self-evident and unproblematic,” critical geopolitical approaches see “space demarcated and constructed for political purposes.”⁶ The spatial turn’s main argument is that space is not a preordained, static, natural category but instead a dynamic web of interactions and interconnections.⁷ When recognizing space as a “product of social translation, transformation, and experience,”⁸ one can consider borders as the result of social and cultural processes that shape territories and their contentious meanings.⁹ In this respect, geopolitical space is made through power and constructed through discourse.¹⁰ The critical research agenda then requires the deconstruction of historically embedded results of geopolitical imagination.

With its new forms of areas, regions, and networks, European integration is challenging the traditional Westphalian state, which is assumed to have fixed borders coupled with sovereignty. However, this does not imply that European integration eliminates territorialization. Indeed, the EU is so involved in border control and internal policing that it serves as a vehicle for reterritorialization rather than deterritorialization.¹¹ The Schengen Agreement, for example, replaces traditional state border controls with EU-style measures such as cross-border police cooperation and mobile surveillance teams.¹² Furthermore, with the establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)¹³ in 2004, border and customs management as well as migration administration have become critical tasks for the EU. Von der Leyen presented her “geopolitical Commission” in this context, emphasizing: “We need to strengthen our external borders to allow us to return to a fully functioning Schengen.”¹⁴

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- 6 Burak Kadercan, “Triangulating Territory: A Case for Pragmatic Interaction between Political Science, Political Geography, and Critical IR”, *International Theory*, Vol. 17 No 1, 2015, p. 129.
- 7 Anne Brown, “The Spatial Turn, Reification and Relational Epistemologies in ‘Knowing about’ Security and Peace”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 55, No 4, 2020, p. 421-41; Bob Jessop, “The Crisis of the National Spatio-Temporal Fix and the Tendential Ecological Dominance of Globalizing Capitalism”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 24, No 2, 2000, p. 323-60; Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London and New York: Sage Publications, 2005; Daniel Lambach, “Space, Scale and Global Politics: Towards a Critical Approach to Space in International Relations”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No 2, 2019.
- 8 Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, p. 80.
- 9 Anssi Paasi, “Europe as a Social Process and Discourse: Considerations of Place, Boundaries and Identity”, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 8, No 1, 2001, p. 16.
- 10 Federica Zardo, “The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Geopolitical Space Making through Migration Policy Instruments”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 27, No 2, 2022, p. 588.
- 11 William Walters, “The Frontiers of the European Union: A Geostrategic Perspective”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 9, No 3, 2004, p. 676.
- 12 *Ibid*, p. 680.
- 13 Frontex is a key actor in enforcing the EU’s border regime. The agency is tasked with ensuring the security of the Schengen Area by harmonising border controls across the EU and assisting member states and Schengen associated countries with external border management. It runs border control operations throughout the Mediterranean Sea and Balkan countries, deploys border guards and sea patrols, coordinates repatriation of illegal immigrants across the EU, and collaborates with third countries as part of the EU’s efforts to externalize border control.
- 14 Von der Leyen quoted in European Commission, “Speech by President-elect”, 2019.

As a result, the EU is reconfiguring “hard” territory through border controls and exclusion policies and engaging in a type of spatial production, which is referred to as Fortress Europe. Yet the EU also introduces a more open version of territoriality based on cohesion. The area of values and solidarity aspired to by the EU refers to soft borders with more dynamic territorial implications. The hard and soft border visions of territoriality that unfold in the European integration process imply that territory “is not being erased, but rather re-inscribed in two senses that are in tension.”¹⁵

Territory, as defined by boundaries, is only one dimension of space. At the same time, space is structural in the sense that it is the result of interactions or relationships.¹⁶ Using this approach, the EU’s space cannot be narrowed down to its borders but can be conceived of as a domain of its influence to varying degrees. This allows us to see the EU’s structural relationship in enlargement and neighborhood policies as constituents of European spatiality. In this manner, the EU’s structural space can be visualized as concentric circles, with member states constituting the inner circle (albeit with varying degrees of proximity to the core). Candidate countries would form the second tier of the circle, with the neighborhood policy forming the looser, third tier, given that the enlargement policy, unlike the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), includes membership prospects. Fourth, the third parties who are not part of the EU’s enlargement or neighborhood policies would be distributed throughout the outermost circle based on the EU’s varying degree of influence over them through bilateral agreements.

Conceptualizing the EU in terms of concentric circles enables us to analytically treat Turkey as a part of European spatiality. Accepted as an official candidate in 1999 and having started accession negotiations in 2005, in the early 2000s Turkey was a country in the second tier of the EU’s spatial circles, i.e., the closest category to the member states. However, due to the stalemate in the accession process and the clear divergences in foreign policy preferences, Turkey has moved further away from the core space of the EU, a process acknowledged as de-Europeanization.¹⁷ Analyzing the Commission’s construction of a geopolitical space for the EU during the crisis at the Turkish-Greek border enables us to pinpoint its positioning of Turkey in terms of spatial proximity. Because spatial imagining is a practice of inclusion and exclusion reconfiguration, Turkey’s spatial positioning in relation to Europe is inextricably linked to the identity dimension.

15 Luiza Bialasiewicz et al., “The Constitution of EU Territory”, *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 3, No 3, 2005, p. 335.

16 John Agnew, “The Territorial Trap : The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory”, *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No 1, 1994, p. 55.

17 Senem Aydın-Düzgit, “De-Europeanisation through Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of AKP’s Election Speeches”, *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No 1, 2016, p. 45-58; Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Alper Kaliber, “Encounters with Europe in an Era of Domestic and International Turmoil: Is Turkey a De-Europeanising Candidate Country?”, *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 21, No 1, 2016, p. 1-14; Ebru Ertugal, “Hidden Phases of De-Europeanization: Insights from Historical Institutionalism”, *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No 7, 2021, p.841-57; Gizem Alioğlu Çakmak, “The European Union and the Turkish Greek rapprochement in 2000s: From Europeanization to De-Europeanization,” Alexis Heraclides and Gizem Alioğlu Çakmak (eds.), *Greece and Turkey in Conflict and Cooperation*, Oxon, Routledge, 2019, p.161-180; Gözde Yılmaz, “From Europeanization to De-Europeanization: The Europeanization Process of Turkey in 1999–2014”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2016, p. 86-100; Başak Alpan, “Europeanization and EU-Turkey Relations: Three Domains Four Periods”, Wulf Reiners and Ebru Turhan (eds.), *EU Turkey Relations Theories, Institutions and Policies*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p.107-137.

The Crisis at the Turkish-Greek Border

On March 18, 2016, with the “EU Turkey Statement” parties agreed that irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into the Greek territory would be returned to Turkey as of March 20, and for every Syrian returned to Turkey, another Syrian would be resettled from Turkey to the EU. The EU committed to supporting Turkey financially in the management of the settlement of Syrians with a total of 6 billion Euros through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRT).¹⁸ The deal enabled the EU to externalize the management of the migration crisis and extra-territorialize the “burden” by recruiting Turkey into a scheme that would move regulation of immigration and asylum away from Europe.¹⁹ In doing so, a dividing line between Turkey and the EU was drawn, while Turkey’s non-Europeanness in terms of spatiality was reinforced as Turkey’s space came to represent what/who does not belong to Europe.

Human rights defenders have criticized the deal on humanitarian and legal grounds, claiming that considering Turkey as a safe third country for refugees is highly dubious and that sending refugees back to Turkey is a clear violation of international refugee and human rights law.²⁰ Nonetheless, three months after its implementation, the Commission’s report deemed the deal beneficial and presented a positive evaluation, citing that it achieved “concrete results” in reducing the number of new immigrants entering Europe via Turkey.²¹ However, given the vulnerability of EU member states to migration flows and the EU’s priority to reduce the flow at all costs, the deal provided Turkey with a bargaining chip of allowing cross-border movements as a means of achieving political goals.²²

The most severe of these occurred in the winter of 2020. Following the killing of 34 Turkish soldiers by the Syrian regime forces in Syria’s Idlib province on February 27, 2020, Turkish authorities announced that they would not impede refugees from crossing to Europe. That is, Turkey declared that it no longer had the intention to carry out its task of protecting the Turkey-Greece border from irregular crossing, citing the EU’s failure to fulfill its obligations under the 2016 deal. In the forthcoming days, Turkey was reported to have “encouraged and facilitated the movement of refugees to the Greek border.”²³ Over the course of two days, more than 13,000 people were reported to have gathered at the formal border crossing points of Pazarkule and Ipsala, along with multiple informal border crossings.²⁴

18 European Council, “EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016”, 2016, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18-eu-turkey-statement/> (Accessed November 2022).

19 Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, “Outsourcing Asylum: The Advent of Protection Lite”, Luiza Bialasiewicz (ed.), *Europe in the World Context: EU Geopolitics and the Making of European Space*, Surrey, Ashgate, 2011, p.129-152.

20 Fatma Yilmaz-Elmas, “EU’s Global Actorness in Question: A Debate over the EU-Turkey Migration Deal.” *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No 68, 2020, p. 161–77.

21 European Commission, “Second Report on the Progress Made in the Implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement EN”, 2016, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:78122b4a-339c-11e6-969e-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_1&format=PDF (Accessed 27 April 2022).

22 Roberto Cortinovic, “Pushbacks and Lack of Accountability at the Greek-Turkish Borders”, *CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe*, Vol.1, 2021, p. 5; Sarah Léonard and Christian Kaunert, “De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey”, *Geopolitics*, 2021, p.18.

23 Amnesty International, “Caught in a Political Game: Asylum-Seekers and Migrants on the Greece / Turkey”, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/2077/2020/en/> (Accessed 27 April 2022).

24 IOM UN Migration, “More than 13,000 Migrants Reported Along the Turkish-Greek Border”, 2020, <https://www.iom.org>.

The Greek government described the situation as an “active, serious, unusual, and asymmetric threat”²⁵ to Greece’s national security rather than an immigration issue.²⁶ In accordance with their framing, Greek authorities retaliated by closing the border gates at Pazarkule-Kastanies and Ipsala-Kipi and mobilizing ground and sea forces. Troops sent to the land border used tear gas, water cannons, smoke grenades, and rubber bullets to prevent entry. Further, a total of 52 ships were dispatched to obstruct arrivals on the islands. Greece requested additional EU assistance for border security. In addition to military and police operations, Greece issued an emergency legislative decree on March 2 suspending asylum applications for one month, which is a clear violation of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights’ fundamental principles of non-refoulement (Article 19) and the right to seek asylum (Article 18).²⁷ Pushback tactics are also incompatible with the EU’s asylum *acquis* obligations that require the member states to grant asylum procedures to applications for international protection.²⁸ However, the European Commission refrained from openly denouncing either the suspension of asylum applications without a legal basis, or the excessive use of force by Greek forces, or the systematic pushbacks into Turkey.

The European Commission’s immediate reaction to the crisis was to call on member states to mobilize their resources to assist Greece. The Action Plan adopted by the Commission and presented to the extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council had five concrete steps to coordinate the EU’s geopolitical role in supporting Greece: Firstly, Frontex would deploy 100 border guards in Greece, in addition to the current 530 border guards, as well as one offshore patrol vessel and six coastal patrol vessels, two helicopters, one aircraft, and three thermo-vision vehicles.²⁹ Second, the coordination of a new return program would facilitate the quick return of persons without the right to stay in Greece to their countries of origin. Third, the EU would provide an overall financial assistance of 700 million euros to support Greece’s reception capacity and voluntary returns. Fourth, a Civil Protection Mechanism would be activated to provide medical equipment, medical teams, shelters, tents, blankets, and other necessary equipment. Fifth, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) will assist Greece with the processing of asylum applications. Furthermore, the Commission emphasized the goal of improving cooperation with partners by establishing a cooperation mechanism with the Western Balkans. As such, the Commission defined the issue as one of border security which not only enabled but also required it to adopt repressive and protectionist migration and asylum measures.

int/news/more-13000-migrants-reported-along-turkish-greek-border (Accessed 27 April 2022).

25 Hellenic Daily News, “Urgent Message from the Government Spokesman about the Crisis in the Borders”, 2020, <https://www.hellenicdailynewsny.com/en-us/hellenism/urgent-message-from-the-government-spokesman-about-the-crisis-in-the-borders> (Accessed 27 April 2022).

26 Ali Huseyinoglu and Deniz Eroğlu Utku, “Turkish-Greek Relations and Irregular Migration at the Southeasternmost Borders of the EU: The 2020 Pazarkule Case”, *Migration Letters*, Vol. 18, No 6, 2021, p. 659-74.

27 Ayşe Dicle Ergin, “What Happened at the Greece-Turkey Border in early 2020?”, 30 September 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/what-happened-at-the-greece-turkey-border-in-early-2020/> (Accessed 27 April 2022).

28 Cortinovic, “Pushbacks and Lack of Accountability”, p. 13.

29 Schinas quoted in European Commission, “Press Remarks by Vice-President Schinas on Immediate Actions to Support Greece”, 4 March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_395 (Accessed 27 April 2022).

Hardening of EU borders: Mimicking a Sovereign State Reflex

The Commission's deployment of Frontex instruments as an immediate action mimics sovereign state reflexes of maintaining territoriality in times of crisis. This is because the Frontex activities at the extremities of a member state territory can be considered more of "a continuation rather than a substantive departure from, older sovereign logics of inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, and the (necessarily violent) attempt to territorialize space."³⁰ Such bordering practices, in turn, become an important mechanism for determining the EU's relations with the rest of the world by "'suturing' and knitting adjacent spaces."³¹ That is, the Commission's resort to the military and police apparatus has direct spatial implications in terms of defining territoriality and determining insider/outsider status.

The five-step Action Plan reveals the "geopolitical Commission's" approach to space, offering a rescue plan based on hardening EU borders and thusly contributes to the imagination of "Fortress Europe" in stark contrast to a more connected, soft European border, defined as a spatially intertwined set of interactions in terms of global flows, economic and communicative exchanges.³² The Commission's opting for constructing borders as fixed entities separating Europe and Turkey revives a traditional border concept associated primarily with sovereign states. This hardline stance is further bolstered by the Commissioners' statements during and after the crisis. A very clear example of this can be found in the statement of von der Leyen, when she paid a solidarity visit to the Greek and Bulgarian borders with Turkey on March 3, 2020. The message that came to the fore during this visit and was reiterated the next day by Vice President Margaritis Schinas was:

"I stand here today as a European at your side. (...) Our first priority is making sure that order is maintained at the Greek external border, which is also a European border."³³

Defining hard borders for Europe in terms of member-state territoriality rather than networking activities substantiates the geopolitical image of Fortress Europe. In this way, a spatial imaginary for Europe is created by mirroring the sovereign state borders. Further, by addressing Greece with the phrase "your side" at the height of the border crisis, the President creates a distinct spatial imagination of the EU by demarcating a European space opposite to what constitutes outside, in this case, Turkey. On the one hand, associating order with the "European side" contributes to an ongoing discursive process of threat construction from immigration, while on the other, it reflects on the relationship between space and identity by constructing a European "us" and non-European "them" distinction.

30 Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Off-Shore Biopolitical Border Security: The EU's Global Response to Migration, Privacy and Risky Subjects", Luiza Bialasiewicz (ed.), *Europe in the World Context: EU Geopolitics and the Making of European Space*, Surrey, Ashgate, 2011, p.185-200.

31 Andrey Makarychev, "Bordering and Identity-Making in Europe After the 2015 Refugee Crisis", *Geopolitics*, Vol. 23, No 4, 2018, p. 747.

32 Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 51.

33 Von der Leyen quoted in European Commission, "Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece, Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, President Sassoli and President Michel", 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_380 (Accessed 27 April 2022).

While the deployment of hardline measures to “protect” European territory from immigrants contributes to the hardening of borders,³⁴ security becomes a critical component in defining political spatiality. Politics, according to Agnew, can only exist within territorial boundaries because “[o]utside is danger, realpolitik, and the use of force.”³⁵ In line with this premise, the Commission’s response to the refugee influx from Turkey to the Greek border by mobilizing Frontex instruments and tightening border controls reinforces the categories of secure and insecure. The main challenge for the Commissioners, as revealed by the Action Plan and official statements, is to keep the European border secure, implying a threat posed by refugees.

Indeed, this is a continuation of a long-standing trend in EU official discourses and border policies in which immigration has been constructed as a security threat³⁶ allowing political actors to take extraordinary measures.³⁷ It is in this context that the European Commission officially describes the events as an emergency, justifying the use of force in the name of defending European space, which is symbolized by security:

“Urgent action is needed to address the immediate challenges faced by Greece at both its land and sea borders with Turkey”³⁸

The Commission’s framing of migration as existential threats to the well-being of European space, as well as political pressure exerted by the Turkish government because of the EU’s immigration deal, leads to the argument that the EU has a duty to ensure Europe’s survival. In this way, von der Leyen takes responsibility on behalf of Europe and expresses her gratitude to all personnel working to manage human mobility by preventing access or expulsion by violent means. As the following statements by von der Leyen and Schinas demonstrate, responsibility becomes a prominent theme in mobilizing a collective European response at the Greek border:

“And I want to thank the Greek border guards and the coast guards, I want to thank the civilians, the police, the servicemen and servicewomen, and I want to thank Frontex for their tireless effort.”³⁹

“In these extraordinary circumstances, the first priority is to ensure order at our external border. This difficult task cannot fall on Greece alone: it is the responsibility

34 Didier Bigo, “The (in)Securitization Practices of the Three Universes of EU Border Control: Military/Navy - Border Guards/Police - Database Analysts”, *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 45, No 3, 2014, p. 212.

35 Agnew, “The Territorial Trap”, p. 62.

36 Jennifer Hyndman, “The Geopolitics of Migration and Mobility”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 17, No 2, 2012, p. 243-55; Léonard and Kaunert, “De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration”, p. 1-23; Nazif Mandacı and Gökay Özerim. 2013. “Uluslararası Göçlerin Bir Güvenlik Konusuna Dönüşümü: Avrupa’da Radikal Sağ Partiler ve Göçün Güvenikleştirilmesi.” *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 10, No 39, 2013, p.105-130; Giray Sadık, and Ceren Kaya. “The Role of Surveillance Technologies in the Securitization of EU Migration Policies and Border Management.” *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No 68, 2020, p. 145–60; Selin Türkeş-Kılıç, “Avrupa Komşuluk Politikası’nda Uluslararası Göçün Güvenikleştirilmesi”, *Mukaddime*, Vol. 9, 2018, p. 1-20; Jef Huysmans, “The European Union and the Securitisation of Migration”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 38, No 5, 2000, p. 751-77.

37 Barry Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

38 European Commission, “Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council”.

39 European Commission, “Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Kyriakos Mitsotakis”.

of the whole of Europe. We have to show unequivocally that the entire European Union will put its strength and support behind Member States faced with external pressure.”⁴⁰

In these statements, what the European Commissioners claim responsibility for shapes the European geography of unity. Responsibility, in this sense, becomes a powerful glue that strengthens the collective European identity while aligning with the argument that the out-group poses threats. The literature on migration and the politics of space demonstrates “how different uses of geographical scale can obscure or articulate the violence happening in these borderlands.”⁴¹ Accordingly, while the European Commission assumes responsibility for Greece’s border protection, it abstains from being held accountable for the use of force and arbitrary detention of refugees that contradict EU and international human rights and refugee protection standards. The Greek border thus delineates the universe of the EU’s responsibility on which ‘strength’ is the inevitable remedy for survival. Von der Leyen’s remarks at the Greek border reveal how the Commission used this crisis to consolidate power over European spatiality: “I thank Greece for being our European *ασπίδα* [English: shield] in these times.”⁴²

Referring to member state borders to demarcate the European territoriality evokes a binary security relationship in terms of a series of associations of Europe with amity, safety, normalcy, and security and of the “outside of Europe” with enmity, violence, exceptionalism, and insecurity.⁴³ Further, the President’s representation of a member state as a protective barrier defending European space implies an external attack and, as such, has belligerent overtones, signaling the “merging of European bordering practices with war practices.”⁴⁴ The image of borders as walls automatically legitimizes the exclusion of migration. The image of borders as a shield, in turn, reflects the spatial imagination of a battleground between Europe and Turkey, legitimizing the violent exclusion of refugees.

The refugee influx into European space thus fuels the desire to border the EU and maintain its security within its borders. Because internal borders have been eliminated, there is a greater need for increased cooperation in stronger border control to ensure “security” within the single market. Given the EU’s strong intergovernmentalism in security and defense matters, this is a difficult task. Indeed, the EU has faced several challenges in managing migration flows. As the 2015 migration crisis demonstrated, the lack of a coordinated approach among member states crippled the EU’s actorship in these areas. Moreover, the ineffectiveness of the EU’s response to the migration flows erodes the spatial image of the EU while driving forward member states’ national territoriality coupled with sovereignty. The response of the European Commission to the Turkish-Greek border crisis in Winter 2020 thus becomes an opportunity to build a geopolitically stronger EU capable of controlling its space. It is in this respect that von der Leyen portrays the

40 Schinas quoted in European Commission, “Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council: Commission Presents Action Plan for Immediate Measures to Support Greece”, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_384 (Accessed 27 April 2022).

41 Zardo, “The EU Trust Fund”, p. 587.

42 European Commission, “Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Kyriakos Mitsotakis”.

43 Vaughan-Williams, “Off-Shore Biopolitical Border Security”, p.185.

44 *Ibid.*

“geopolitical Union” as a more competent actor than before, capable of reinforcing a spatial domain in response to challenges posed by migration flows than it was in 2015:

“To those who have questioned over the last days the European capacities, I say very clearly that we are much better prepared in the European Union today, compared to 2015. That is why we are able to send all this help to Greece at the moment being.”⁴⁵

Associating the refugee flow from Turkey with threat and danger equips the European Commission with a unique “ability to stimulate people to contract into a political community.”⁴⁶ This, in turn, serves as a foundation for the EU’s call for solidarity with Greece and unity.

Turkey as the Constitutive Other of Europe

The formation of a more unified Europe constitutes the backbone of a geopolitical EU. Although the language of European integration is based on the assumption “that European unity is a virtually accomplished fact and an unquestioned good”,⁴⁷ unity is, indeed, a continuous commitment practice that must be reinforced on a regular basis. At this point, identity, as a spatial category of a dividing line between Self and Other,⁴⁸ is critical in mobilizing support for European unity and justifying the Commission’s foreign policy stance.

Balibar acknowledged the intrinsic relationship between the politics of space and identity by defining territorialization as a means of assigning identities to collective subjects and categorizing them within power structures. Such a process is only possible through the violent or peaceful exclusion of others.⁴⁹ This is in line with the critical constructivist standpoint, which regards difference as an essential locus of identity due to its security implications. In this regard, the EU’s role as a geopolitical actor is increasingly defining European identity through distinct spatial imaginations⁵⁰ that formulate a mutually constitutive relationship between Self and Other, where the categorization of Turkey as the opposite of, almost a threat to Europe’s well-being, serves to define Europeaness. That is, European spatial identity is constructed in relation to the distinction that Turkey represents. To collectivize and differentiate European and Turkish identities, the Commission employs an argumentative strategy that includes the use of personal pronouns such as “we, they,” as well as possessive pronouns such as “our, and their,” as demonstrated by von der Leyen’s statement below:

“Those who seek to test Europe’s unity will be disappointed. We will hold the line and our unity will prevail. Now is the time for concerted action and cool heads and acting based on our values.”⁵¹

45 European Commission, “President von der Leyen at the WHO press conference”, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/statement_20_741 (Accessed 27 April 2022).

46 Huysmans, “The European Union and the Securitisation”, p. 757.

47 Paasi, “Europe as a Social Process”, p. 11.

48 Ibid., p.10.

49 Etienne Balibar, “Europe as Borderland”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 27, No 2, 2009, p. 192.

50 Luiza Bialasiewicz, “Introduction: Europe in the World”, Luiza Bialasiewicz (ed.), *Europe in the World EU Geopolitics and the Making of European Space*, Surrey, Ashgate, 2011, p.7.

51 Von der Leyen quoted in European Commission, “Remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference

Turkey thus becomes not only an outsider but also a constitutive other to Europe, which is required to solidify European unity. Another argumentative strategy adopted by the Commission is to create an in-group identity based on historical connotations and references to shared glories.⁵² These stories maintain the worth of boundaries for the community who are sustained by the territory and motivate their dedication to this territory's survival.⁵³ In this regard, the Commission bases its definition of Europe not only on a concurrent European space, but also on a spatial past: "Ours is an old continent, and one that has always stood upright in the face of history. And this time will be no different."⁵⁴

Such strategies feed into the geopolitical othering⁵⁵ of Turkey and allow for the construction of a space for a values-based European community. Indeed, Mazower contends that the EU's "Europe" is more of a promise or delusion than reality.⁵⁶ In this regard, the Commission's spatial imagination of Europe is a synthetic mapping practice that promotes comprehension of a distinct set of norms and values. In this practice, the constitutive others as well as histories, memories, and myths are powerful tools for uniting people and tying them to specific spaces. The strong emotional bonds formed as a result are portrayed as "natural."⁵⁷ Hence, allusions to a collective past elicit a particular imagination based on shared experiences, unity, and connectivity.

So far, it has been argued that the Commission has established an opposing position for Europe to Turkey by securitizing border crossings and constructing a European unity based on the self-other dichotomy. In doing so, the adopted discourse is reminiscent of a bordering and war practice interplay. At this point, it should be noted that while the Commissioners rely on Turkey's constitutive otherness to argue for Europe's unity and connectivity, they also emphasize that Turkey is not an enemy: "[A]s the President said yesterday in Evros, Turkey is not an enemy, but people are not weapons either."⁵⁸

In such discourse, Turkey is positioned as a non-European but not an adversary. This can be explained by the fact that the Commission's long-term migration policy remains the implementation of the 2016 Deal, which includes a relaunch of the EU-Turkey migration agenda. In other words, despite the tensions, the geopolitical Commission sees Turkey as an existing and potential partner. While acknowledging that this agreement has increased Turkey's bargaining power⁵⁹ and allows for weaponization, that is, the intentional use of migrants to achieve foreign policy objectives,⁶⁰ the Commission continues to prioritize the externalization

with Kyriakos Mitsotakis".

52 Paasi, "Europe as a Social Process", p. 20.

53 Penrose, "Nations, States and Homelands", p. 282.

54 Schinas quoted in European Commission, "Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council".

55 Thomas Diez, "Europe's others and the return of geopolitics", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2004, s.

56 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, London, Penguin Books, 1998.

57 Penrose, "Nations, States and Homelands", p. 282.

58 Schinas quoted in European Commission, "Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council".

59 Asli Okyay and Jonathan Zaragoza-Cristiani, "The Leverage of the Gatekeeper: Power and Interdependence in the Migration Nexus between the EU and Turkey", *International Spectator*, Vol. 51, No 4, 2016, p. 51-66.

60 Kelly Greenhill, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion and Foreign Policy*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2010.

of migration and the use of Turkey as a buffer zone: “We must now focus to find a way forward. (...) a lot goes back to the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016, which remains valid.”⁶¹

The EU’s willingness to continue working with Turkey to secure its own borders from migration flows results in a very nuanced identity for Turkey. On the one hand, Turkey is the “insecure other” that generates European unity and connectivity in the Commission’s discourses. However, on the other hand, it is not marginalized enough for the EU to completely break cooperation on migration. As a result, Turkey finds itself in a peculiar position in relation to European space.

Positioning of Turkey as a Neighbor: One More Tier Out in the European Space

When Turkey serves as a buffer zone for European space during the migration crisis, its position on the outside is consolidated. In accordance with this, in their statements on migration policy, the Commissioners choose to refer to Turkey as a third party and a neighbor, even though it is still an official candidate. For instance, at the height of the border crisis, Ylva Johansson, the Commissioner for Home Affairs, explained the joint commitment she obtained as a result of her meetings with member states, European Parliament parties, and other stakeholders, saying that “our relations with third countries like Turkey is very, very important.”⁶² Later that year, in her first annual State of the Union address, von der Leyen stated that “Turkey is and will continue to be an important neighbor”, and she further added: “while we are close together on the map, the distance between us appears to be growing”⁶³, implying that spatial categories mean more than mere geographical positions. Further, in September 2021, the European Commission’s General Directorate of “Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations” has undergone structural changes. Turkey, which was previously handled in the same directorate as the accession countries of Western Balkans, was moved to the directorate titled “Southern Neighborhood, Turkey, Migration/Refugees and Security Issues” along with the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. Although the Commission stated that this was a structural change to regulate workload, maintain efficiency, and coherence of internal organization, and that “there is no change in policy vis-à-vis Turkey,”⁶⁴ by grouping Turkey with its southern neighbors, who do not have membership prospects, the new scheme pushed Turkey out to the neighborhood tier and treated it solely from a migration and security standpoint.

61 European Commission, “Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel, following their meeting with the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_429 (Accessed 27 April 2022).

62 European Commission, “Press Remarks by Vice-President Johansson on Immediate Actions to Support Greece”, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_396 (Accessed 18 September 2022).

63 European Commission, “State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary”, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_20_1655%0Ahttps://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655.https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_20_1655 (Accessed 17 September 2022).

64 Merve Ayşe Kızılaslan, “EU commission shifting Turkey to MENA unit: Is it a political decision?”, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/eu-commission-shifting-turkey-to-mena-unit-is-it-a-political-decision-50726> (Accessed 17 September 2022).

Because of the term's externalizing function, the Commission's references to Turkey as a neighbor are not a neutral indicator of geographical position but rather a discursive tool for demarcating space. This is particularly significant given that, when the ENP was launched in 2004, Turkey was accepted to start accession negotiations and, as a result, was not a part of neighborhood policy. However, by 2020, Turkey had become more of a neighbor than a candidate in the EU official discourses. This shift in terminology results from a long-standing detachment between Turkey and the EU, which also manifests itself in the border crisis and becomes a feature of European space. Although Turkey is not an official part of the ENP, it is treated as one and thus re-positioned one-tier further out of the enlargement policy. In this way, Turkey is de facto included in the ENP space in the EU's official discourse. Furthermore, in the face of external pressure from Turkey, the Commission's goal in the Action Plan to improve partner cooperation by establishing a cooperation mechanism with the Western Balkans is another indicator that European territory has been respaced. As candidate countries, the Western Balkan countries have grown closer to Europe than Turkey.

Conclusion

The 2020 Greek-Turkish border crisis provided an important opportunity for the newly appointed von der Leyen Commission to demonstrate its geopolitical vision. They seized this opportunity to construct an image of strengthened unity within a hard-shelled European space. This was made possible by three dynamics that underpin the Commission's spatial imagination of Europe: First, the Commission adopts a hardline approach reinforcing traditional boundary demarcation practices akin to sovereign states which helps to justify the violent measures at the European territory, distinguishing between a secure European space and an insecure outside. Second, in its call for European unity, the Commission engages in a re-construction of European identity in relation to the constitutive other, Turkey. As a result, identity's self-other nexus becomes inextricably linked to the spatial demarcation between inside and outside. Third, the discourse generated by the Commission on the border crisis reveals Turkey's position in the European space as a neighbor rather than a candidate.

In one month, the border crisis, which coincided with Europe's Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, reduced tensions. Following the first reported Covid-19 case on March 11, Turkey closed all its borders, effectively abandoning the policy of allowing border crossings. On March 27, thousands of refugees who had been waiting at the Pazarkule border were relocated within the country. In this way, the pandemic gave Turkish authorities leeway to back down from the crisis in the name of measures taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Despite the rapid de-escalation, the crisis has served as a warning sign of the potential problems that the 2016 deal may cause. Nonetheless, the Commission's willingness to continue with the deal demonstrates that Turkey will remain the only remedy for keeping European space free of refugees. The recent literature on EU-Turkey relations emphasizes the increasing weight of functional cooperation vis-à-vis the accession process. One of the main veins of this interest-based relationship is migration policy. This article has revealed how a predicament in the cooperation in migration management relates to the EU's spatial construction practices toward Turkey. In light of the analysis, the relationship is likely to be determined by Turkey's

geopolitical otherness as well as the securitization of European borders. Hence, the divide between Turkish and European spaces may arguably widen in the coming years.

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