Migrants as ‘pawns’: Antimigrant debates on Twitter and their affinity to European border politics and discourses

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Abstract
This article explores how Europe’s border crises in the post refugee ‘crisis’ years were discussed in the micro-blog Twitter, through an in-depth analysis of boundary making. Our focus is on the tweets of the top influencers of the hashtag #IStandWithGreece who strategically promoted ideologies ranging from white supremacism to Greek nationalism, glued together by an antimigrant stance during a border ‘crisis’ at Europe’s periphery. This network of intolerance promoted a representation of migrants as ‘pawns’; seen like a chess piece, with no value in their own right, literally pushed towards Europe by Turkey, who elevated them into a sizable threat. Within this, Europe was represented as a paradoxical other, the fallen Self, for not rising up to the opportunity to protect its sovereignty and identity through more securitization. Despite being diffused by extreme antimigrant Twitterers, we argue that these tweets offer a more overtly racist expression of otherwise mainstream European (Union) discourses and politics on migration. Effectively, #IStandWithGreece’s influencers functioned as Europe’s alter-ego mouthpiece, saying the unsayable using social media, and their affordances contributing to the normalization of an oppressive and restrictive European border management.

Keywords
Borders, Europe, migration, othering, qualitative analysis, social media, Twitter

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Introduction

Migration incidences and ‘crises’ at the European Union’s (EU) external land and sea-borders have been covered by traditional media (Berry et al., 2015; De Cleen et al., 2017), and debated from various perspectives within social media (De Rosa et al., 2021; Siapera et al., 2018). France’s Calais, Italy’s Lampedusa, Greece’s Aegean islands, and more recently, the Greek–Turkey Evros land-border and the Polish-Belarusian border – among others – are, albeit to different extents, sites for the deployment of migration crises’ spectacles, which lend themselves to the demarcation of the boundaries between us and the (migrant) other. Around them, a mediated debate is evolving, rooted in a perceived fear that the events of the summer and autumn of 2015, marking the peak of the so-called European Refugee crisis, during which thousands of people requested asylum in Europe, could be revived. This is co-constituted with the idea – which seems to be transcending the mainstream political spectrum – that new arrivals should not be ‘too much for Europe to handle’ (Leurs et al., 2020: 679). Progressively, the idea that migrants are pushed over by Europe’s enemies, or ungodly ‘friends’, as we will argue here, to harm it, is consolidated, justifying more border securitization regardless of the cost to human lives.

Borders and identities are underpinned by practices and discourses which circulate in various media, online and offline (Engelbert et al., 2019). In social media, the far-right is mostly outspokenly antimigrant, while the populist right-wing often uses coded antimigrant discourses which have contributed to mainstreaming European exclusionary politics through the ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak, 2015). EU’s migration agenda falls little outside the restrictive frames proposed by the far-right, and the populist, authoritarian right-wing, as the characterizations fortress Europe and apartheid Europe suggest (Ponzanesi and Blaagaard, 2011). Naturally, the EU is not openly suggesting that deaths at the borders are acceptable side-effects of its border securitization, but the far-right on social media may in fact be uttering the unsayable when they are asking for explicit violence towards migrants, as indicated by the use of hashtags such as #raperefugees (Siapera et al., 2018) or #refugeesnotwelcome (Kreis, 2017). The knot that ties together ideologies that advocate fierce antimigrant politics and mainstream European migration politics is perhaps the elephant in the room that critical scholarship should not hesitate to pinpoint. Importantly, the connections between extreme antimigrant and mainstream EU migration discourses and politics need to be drawn out at times when fears related to migration give rise to the dehumanization of people on the move, effected by the othering of other key migration actors, the legitimization of border atrocities, and the turning of the death of migrant others into a banal occurrence.

In view of the above, we offer an in-depth analysis of othering in Twitter around the hashtag #IStandWithGreece, associated with a border crisis at Europe’s periphery in early 2020, concerning neighbouring countries, Greece and Turkey, with a turbulent history of antagonisms. In so doing, we reflect on the extent to which the othering processes we track in these tweets, by far-right elite and non-elite voices, offer a more overtly racist expression of official EU discourses about migration to the extent that they may be mutually constituted. Hashtag IstandwithGreece, created in the midst of the events studied, began trending on Twitter and around it a ‘network of intolerance’ was organized to
strategically promote ideologies ranging from white supremacism to Greek nationalism, glued together by antimigrant positions (Avraamidou et al., 2021). Focus on these events, and on Twitter, allowed for an in-depth analysis of transnational boundary making, its relationship to Greek nationalism, and European border politics and discourses.

**Boundary construction: othering and the mediated European migration debate**

Othering is a ‘process of differentiation and demarcation between “us” and “them” – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained’ (Lister, 2004: 101). As Lister indicates, the differentiation of us from them is done in a way that favours the ingroup and undermines the outgroup such that the outgroup’s subjugation and exclusion from the ingroup follows naturally. Postcolonial approaches to othering understood it as a process of portraying the other, the Indigenous communities, as different, stressing their inferiority to the Self, the colonizers (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012). Capitalizing on the constructed inferiority of different others, discrimination and exclusion was justified by the dominant group, enabling it to maintain unequal power relationships. Thus, othering aids the preservation of hierarchies and the propagation of ingroup-domination/protection policies.

In the case of migration, the othering of migrants is linked to specific policies such as border management and securitization. Representations of the other are instrumental in that they justify political decision making (Glaveanu and Laurent, 2015). This connection is achieved through a process of political imagination (Glaveanu and Laurent, 2015) that is creating imageries, future scenarios, of how life would be if the other penetrated it. This process consists of building representations of others which are then used to limit or enhance those others’ abilities to achieve their (imagined) political aims (Glaveanu and Laurent, 2015). Labelling ‘people on the move’ as migrants versus refugees, for example, is deeply political, leading to the endorsement of certain representations of these people which give rise to opposing political demands: the support of open or closed borders (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Similarly, crisis imaginaries legitimize the actions of those in power, in view of utopian futures, that, as in the case of migration, capitalize on the threatening nature of the other (Krzyzanowski, 2020).

Mediated othering of migrants largely reflects and reproduces the above processes and has been the focus of ample research: studies have shed light on how traditional media in Europe have represented the migration debate within and across member states during the so-called 2015 Refugee crisis (Drüeke et al., 2021; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017) and explored also the role of more transnational sites such as social media (Siapera et al., 2018). Pre-existing antithetical migration frames (Van Gorp, 2005) re-emerged during the European refugee ‘crisis’ (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017): the humanitarian one, representing refugees as victims and as passive actors in need of help, and the fear and securitization one, construing refugees as intruders who are agentic, opting to perform illicit actions and practices such as crossing borders without permission, and therefore threatening. All in all, the strategic use of the word ‘crisis’ by the media to describe migration in Europe set the ground for boundary construction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, regardless of the valence of the discourse (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017).
Another aspect of othering as noted by Dervin (2012) is defining or redefining the Self in relation to the other. Within the migration debate, the so-called influx of non-Europeans into Europe has triggered discussions around European identity or Europeanness, in an attempt to redefine the self in juxtaposition to the other. Himmel and Baptista (2020) explored migration discourses in German and Portuguese media between 2011 and 2017 and found, for example, that when migrants or refugees were assigned as ‘the Other’, being European was equaled to not being Muslim. Interestingly, research illustrated the multiple and often conflicting media representations of Europe, and the EU in particular, in national media, thus shedding light on its inherent fragmentation and intra-antagonisms for and against close migration policies, and on what being European means (Avraamidou et al., 2018; Avraamidou, 2020).

Othering can take particularly interesting forms in social media for a host of reasons. Social media host transnational discussions (Froio and Ganesh, 2019) while also allowing for national affiliations which means that the self is not constant and can alternate between the national self or a more overarching self, such as being European. There is, for example, research showing how transnational far-right audiences bond in social media to spread antimigrant ideas (Froio and Ganesh, 2019), as well as how nationalism emerges in discussing refugee issues on Twitter among users affiliated with specific national contexts (Bozdağ, 2020). Research is, however, rather undeveloped when it comes to how transnational and national debates online intertwine in spreading antimigrant stances.

In addition, the presence of antimigrant and nationalistic discourse capitalizing on othering processes appears stronger online. Migrant othering in Twitter was found to be more blatant compared to traditional media in 2015, as indicated by the frequent use of openly negative hashtags such as #rapefugees, with the far-right being almost exclusively responsible for endorsing the representation of refugees as terrorists or rapists (Siapera et al., 2018). Yet, in-depth examination of how the Othering of both refugees as well as other actors is motivated in social media is rare, as the field is dominated by big data approaches (Bozdağ and Smets, 2017). Simultaneously, and partially perhaps due to this dominance, research is rather undeveloped when it comes to the intersections of how transnational othering in social media intertwines with ethnonationalism, and vice versa. This is a gap our study seeks to address through a qualitative analysis of antimigrant tweets during a crisis at Europe’s borders.

EU border politics and the Evros events: Quo Vadis Europe?

Our study focuses on the Evros events of late February and mid-March 2020, broadly attributed to Turkey’s decision to suspend a controversial agreement with the EU regarding the handling of refugees fleeing Turkey to enter Europe. Briefly, the EU-Turkey migration deal of March 2016 meant that migrants crossing into Greek islands would be relocated to Turkey and in return, Turkey would receive monetary compensation from the EU, and Turkish citizens received a visa waiver for EU travel. The deal’s suspension resulted in refugees, previously locked in Turkey, moving towards the Turkish, Greek, and Bulgarian land-border demarcated by the river Evros, to enter the two EU member
states. Thousands also attempted to cross to the Greek islands. Greece closed its borders and deployed security forces. Reportedly, members of the far-right from Greece and other EU member states travelled to the border in early March 2020 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Furthermore, Greece suspended all asylum procedures until mid-May 2020, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, and progressively adopted more restrictive containment measures for refugee populations in its camps (Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021).

The Evros events concerned primarily neighbouring countries Greece and Turkey, with a turbulent history of geo-political antagonisms in the area. Evros has been a place of ‘symbolic struggles’ (Gkintidis, 2013) where Greek and Turkish nationalisms tend to compete as a Greek-Muslim minority inhabits villages around the border (Gkintidis, 2013). The events were also of European interest as Evros composes EU’s external border, which rendered them relevant to the EU/Turkey migration deal. The European Commission’s (2020) President visited the area and, alongside some ambiguous remarks about Turkey’s role, she spoke of Greece as ‘our European ασπίδα (English: shield)’, and shared the conviction that ‘we will hold the line’ (Statement, 2020), thus giving the EU’s decisive support to border closure and securitization.

The year after, Greece proceeded to an extension and surveillance upgrade of a fence in the Evros area which coincided with the Taliban’s resurgence and dominance in Afghanistan of August 2021. Greek officials argued that this border upgrade would enable it to deter Afghans from entering, declaring that ‘we will not allow a reliving of the scenes of 2015’ (Reuters, 2021). At the time, the Czech Prime Minister also said that there was no room for Afghani refugees in Europe (Euractiv, 2021). Importantly, the EU corroborated these concerns: an EU Ministerial statement appearing to focus on the prevention of a new humanitarian crisis, underlined the EU’s goal ‘to prevent the recurrence of uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration movements faced in the past’ (Council of Europe, 2021).

Fears about massive numbers of Afghans arriving in Europe are only part of a series of relevant analogies made by EU and national leaders in the post-2015 era. Earlier, the controversial Belarusian President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko was accused of using migrants at Belarus’ borders with Lithuania, an EU member state, to conduct a ‘hybrid’ war against the EU (Euronews, 2021). The situation escalated and by the end of 2021, the Polish-Belarusian border had turned into a battlefield, resembling the Evros 2020 events, around which a blame-game between key actors evolved while hundreds of people remained trapped in deteriorating conditions and some died helpless (Al Jazeera, 2021). The European Commissioner for home affairs tweeted, among others, at the peak of the events that Europe’s ‘urgent priority is to turn off the supply coming into Minsk airport.’ (Johansson, 2021), with supply meaning people on the move.

Notwithstanding the cruel instrumentalization of migrants by several international actors and authoritarian leaders, the EU’s preoccupation with the threat of just another influx, and its routinely dehumanizing metaphor of migrants as weapons, has implications for attitudes and policies about migration from the global south specifically. Namely, in the backdrop of this debate, border securitization across the EU increases with severe consequences for the lives of people en route to Europe. Balkan states continue the harassment and intimidation of people on the move, Poland and Lithuania are constructing their own fences, and EU member states of the Mediterranean Sea (e.g.
Greece, Croatia, Cyprus) increased ‘pushbacks’ in the last 5 years, violating international regulations, such as non-refoulement, in the name of national and European security. Ultimately, EU border politics do cause deaths, and EU’s controversial Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) is routinely accused of playing an active role in pushbacks. Migrant lives matter and it is an imperative to outline how these othering processes, that border discourses engender, are linked with, and thus feed into, the existing EU border regime.

Research rationale, methodology and method

Social media, and particularly Twitter, have become a ‘powerful communication tool during many kinds of crises, political or otherwise’ (Howard and Kollanyi, 2016: 1). Twitter affordances allow communities outside a specific country to debate on topics of wider appeal (Kreis, 2017). An example is migration, which has drawn the attention of a transnational audience from the far-right (Froio and Ganesh, 2019) which often bond around negative evaluative hashtags in English such as #refugeesnotwelcome, used during the so-called Refugee crisis (Kreis, 2017) or #Islamexit, used after the Brexit referendum (Evolvi, 2019). Occasionally, elite and non-elite far-right voices may coordinate to spread antimigrant positions in social media using more covert hashtags too (Avraamidou et al., 2021). Simultaneously, on Twitter, nationalism is reproduced from below when twitterers of a particular country debate refugee issues (Bozdag, 2020).

Our focus is on an evaluative, yet ambiguous hashtag, #IstandwithGreece, used in the midst of the Evros events and which became the most popular hashtag on Twitter around which a social network was organized, promoting antimigrant views (Avraamidou et al., 2021). The tweets shared by #IStandWithGreece’s top influencers form our research focus. Namely, we sought to interrogate the othering discourse in social media post-2015, by looking for wider reasons for othering, going beyond the well-documented representation of the threatening migrant. In so doing, we performed a qualitative thematic analysis to identify meanings promoted, approaching each tweet in our data-set as an integrated discourse comprised of text, multimedia, and other Twitter affordances (Evolvi, 2019).

Below, we describe the data gathering method that resulted in the collection of 1,850,954 tweets, the sampling strategy and the qualitative analysis of a smaller sample of 818 tweets. To clarify, our qualitative sampling was purposeful, driven by the research question and not by a concern for representativeness (Mason, 2002).

Data collection and sampling rationale

When Turkey declared the suspension of the 2016 deal with the EU, at the end of February 2020, we started collecting tweets using relevant keywords (e.g. Greece refugee(s), refugeesgr, Turkey asylum) through DMI-TCAT (Borra and Rieder, 2014) which provides a real-time stream of tweets, including retweets and replies. The 31st March 2020 is the last day of our sampling period because we observed a local minimum in the 5-day rolling window variance in the frequency distribution (see Figure 1). In our
data, #IStandWithGreece was the most frequently used hashtag, used in about 32% of the tweets collected.

Using social network analysis (Markham and Lindgren, 2014), we identified the network’s top 10 influencers and the sub-network communities in which they belonged. As explained (Avraamidou et al., 2021), ethno-nationalists, white supremacists, and other antimigrant voices almost exclusively dominated the debate under #IStandWithGreece. For example, far-right British social media persona, Katie Hopkins, and members of the French Identarian movement, were among the top 10 influencers all eventually banned from Twitter (Avraamidou et al., 2021; BBC News, 2020).

Our understanding of the meanings that #IStandWithGreece influencers promoted was informed solely from co-hashtag analysis, which provided us with descriptive insights. To identify a more manageable number of tweets for an in-depth analysis in line

**Figure 1. #IStandWithGreece frequencies graph.**
with our current research question, we isolated the re/tweets of the top 10 influencers tweeting in English and in the Greek language, in which we are fluent. Two of the top 10, the British tabloid Mail Online and French President Emmanuel Macron, had not tweeted using #IStandWithGreece, so we added the next two top influencers (both accounts currently suspended). Number 11 did not re/tweet in either English or Greek but Top Number 12 re/tweeted 29 tweets in English. This provided us with a total of 818 tweets of which 607 had a photo or a video (URL) and which we deemed sufficient for the in-depth analysis we aimed for. Overall, they concerned re/tweets of five of the most representative communities of the network: Anglophones 1 and 2 which discussed the events, adopting a global, conspiratorial perspective; the Greek community comprising mostly Greek nationalists; the Germanic community headed by the German and Austrian far-right; and the French community (its top influencers tweeted only once in English). This led to the Greek community being over-represented in our qualitative sample (see Table 1). Although this can be considered a limitation, it enabled us to have rich data to study a specific nationalist discourse, that developing among users tweeting in Greek, with more transnational antimigrant discourses in English. Furthermore, as clarified, we were not preoccupied with representativeness in this analysis.

**Thematic analysis**

Our thematic analysis, ‘a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 6), was driven by our primary and secondary question, who is othered and why. In identifying and reporting themes as active researchers (Taylor and Usser, cited in Braun and Clark, 2006: 7), we primarily focused on nomination and predication that is the representations of actors and their characteristics and the representation of positive self and negative other (Wodak, 2015: 52). This guided our coding too: ‘Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study’ (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 56). In this case, the entire tweet was coded which is a rather pragmatic choice given the rather small length of a tweet, and a choice that allowed us to avoid de-contextualization of codes. Each code represented an actor of the events, and additionally, we had other codes drawn from our data (e.g. reference to the events as ‘clashes’). Coding was exhaustive as all the tweets were assigned at least one code. To identify the themes, we engaged in a close reading of coded tweets reflecting what Braun and Clark (2006: 16) referred to as a ‘recursive process’ of moving ‘back and forth as needed, throughout the phases’, looking for unanticipated insights, one of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Number of tweets (% of total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglophone 1</td>
<td>68 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>663 (81.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germanic</td>
<td>57 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francophone</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglophone 2</td>
<td>29 (3.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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the great advantages of qualitative research (Mason, 2002). Although focusing on meanings, we do shed light on discursive instances that promote Us/Other binaries when relevant (e.g. ad hominem attacks) or to highlight common antimigrant discourses or rhetoric strategies (e.g. metaphors) adhering to the tradition of critical discourse analysis. This is in line with Reisigl and Wodak’s assertion (2001: 41) that ‘through discourse, discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated and legitimized’. As we studied Twitter discourse, we also follow Jackson and Welles (cited in Evolvi, 2019: 391) paying attention to meanings provided by the combination of language with images and other affordances (e.g. videos). Finally, in reflecting on the affinity of this antimigrant discourse with the EU’s, we do not aim for a strictly comparative analysis, but to rather offer a critique of how we see this empirically grounded othering and the political aims connected with it relating to broader mainstream EU’s border politics, with the expectation that this will motivate further work, to foreground relevant arguments more systematically.

Findings

**Turkey and migrants as imminent and a real threat: ‘Erdogan’s hordes of illegal immigrants’**

#IStandWithGreece’s influencers represented Turkey and migrants as a joint, mutually reinforcing threat to Greece, Greek people, and Europe or the West. Turkey was represented as the mastermind behind the border events and migrants were construed as threatening due to their sheer size, gender composition and propensity to radicalization. An indicative tweet exemplifying the representation of Turkey and migrants as a coordinated threat against Greece, while assuming that all migrants were *en route* to Germany, read,

> The scale of Erdogan’s operation against #Greece is huge. Tens of thousands of migrants have been bussed to the border & constantly attack Greek border guards in their attempts to storm the border, march through the Balkans & reach Germany #GreeceUnderAttack #IstandWithGreece. (Example 1: 3 March 2020)

This tweet interpreted the events as an orchestrated attack implemented by migrants and coordinated by Turkey who, it was claimed, was literary ‘bussing’ them to Greece. The word ‘operation’ is telling, as it conveys the message that the events were pre-planned. The tweet is accompanied by a video showing people (migrants) in some form of congregation with smoke visible at the background (Figure 2). Evidently, this choice of war-like images facilitates the representation of the border as a battlefield and serves to underscore the severity and the urgency of the situation.

In similar tweets, the migrant other was intentionally gendered (male), whereas women and children were almost absent, perhaps because reference to them would challenge the ubiquitous image of a threatening Other. Where reference to women and children was made, what was discussed was their absence. An indicative tweet noted,

> Count the women and children among the migrants at the Greek border. They can’t make up more than 5%. (Example 2: 3 March 2020)
Thus, influencers corroborated the representation of an unquestionably threatening migrant other, merely on the basis of gender and age (young male), and assumed religion. The multiple images that the network shared of young, violent men collide with the notion of the deserving other, connoting that these migrants are not worthy of being let in, as the following suggests:

Sorry but when people who seek asylum use tear gas grenades to achieve their goal [they] are not refugees they are invaders and they are not accepted. BORDERS CLOSED FOREVER. #Greece_under_attack #IStandWithGreece’ (Example 3: 5 March 2020)

The above Twitterer appears to be apologetic claiming that had people at the border been ‘genuine’ refugees, then they would be accepted. But given these people carry tear grenades instead, this strips them from any right to claim refugee status. Importantly, not being real refugees is eventually used to justify permanent border closure, probably the ultimate restrictive migration policy that a nation state can implement, and a measure that ensures that these non-refugees stay away permanently, as the capitalized ‘FOREVER’ denotes.

Another dominating male presence in these tweets was Turkey’s leader, Tayyip Erdogan, represented as the vicious mastermind tricking migrants to believe that they would be able to cross from Greece towards other European countries. Reference in one tweet to ‘Erdogan’s hordes of illegal immigrants’ alludes to how these events are in part a one-man show controlling the migrant crowds. Moreover, a Twitterer compared Erdogan to Hitler but, funnily, also prompted Greek soldiers to kill border crossers:

#Erdogan_is_Hitler; people at the borders are invaders, so if ‘[. . .] anyone passes. SHOOT TO KILL. (Example 4: 1 March 2020)
Using Twitter affordances, as the Hitler-Erdogan analogy is a hashtag, the tweet becomes an amalgam of paradoxes. The Twitterer considered calling someone Hitler as an insult, but then demanded the killing of anyone crossing borders and used Hitler, an ultimate figure of intolerance, to support it. This ad hominem attack against Erdogan by association with Hitler was coupled with insults that repeatedly described Erdogan as a madman, a criminal and a tyrant. Ad hominem attacks and insults are used to pathologize Erdogan, representing him as a culpable supervillain; capable of calculated acts but also unable to moderate the uncanniness of his acts due to psychological instability. Erdogan’s supervillain nature can only be topped by that of the jihadists – another common representation of people at the border – and together they form very potent anti-heroes.

**Historical ‘other’: ‘#Greece guarding the Thermopylae of the Western world’**

The history of intergroup relations in the region as merely one of ethno-religious conflicts leading to territorial disputes between two main homogenized groups, Christians and Muslims, was deployed by #IStandWithGreece influencers to justify othering. These representations were expectably infused with Greek nationalism promoted by Greece-affiliated influencers and diffused widely by non-Greek influencers.

The tweet below is a good example of a Helleno-centric historical representation, according to which Turkey is a serial perpetrator attacking Greeks, and the Evros events form recent evidence of the omnipresent Turkish aggression:

> Turkey committed genocide on the Greeks – Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974, occupied for 46 years and violate human rights and international laws – Turkey also violates Greek airspace daily -Turkey is weaponising immigrants. But apparently #Greece is the aggressor. #IStandWithGreece. (Example 5: 4 March 2020)

This tweet refers to certain events in an ostensibly historical sequence to illustrate the continuity of Turkish aggression against Greece and Cyprus, an EU member state, which, according to Greek nationalists, is Greek, despite the long-standing presence of a Turkish-Cypriot community on the island. The reference to a Greek genocide probably alludes to the 1922 conclusion of the Greco-Turkish war in Asia Minor that led to – among other things – the formation of the Turkish Republic and a large compulsory population exchange between the two countries. This is linked to the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, and Turkey’s alleged violations of Greek airspace occurring simultaneously with the Evros events.

The connecting thread justifying lumping together Arab migrants and Turkey is Islam, which is deterministically associated to fundamentalism and terrorism. Therefore, migrants by virtue of being Muslims, fit the historical enemy narrative. The tweet below illustrates vividly the representation of these events as an omnipresent conflict between the Crescent, represented by Turkey and Muslim migrants, and the Cross, defended by Greek soldiers:

> @KTHopkins Erdogan says he will flood Europe with Muslims until the Crescent triumphs over the Cross. This is the border with Greece. Mosque in the distance. Soldiers of the Cross holding the line. This is biblical. #IStandWithGreece. (Example 6: 8 March 2020)
In another example (Figure 3), a myth is invoked to sketch Turkey and migrants as a joined enemy not only of Greece, but of Europe more broadly. It is accompanied by a photo illustrating a number of weaponized men resembling Jihadists, getting out of a wooden horse. The tweet reads,

Turkey trying to pull a trojan horse on Europe but having to get through Hellas that originally invented it proves impossible. #IStandWithGreece. (Example 7: 1 March 2020)

The analogy attempted here is interesting, not least because the Trojan horse myth, which the image portrays, is of a time when neither the Greek nor the Turkish nations existed. It refers to a trick that causes the target to invite a foe into its own home. According to mythology, Odysseus, a rather canny figure, conceived the idea of using it to deceive the Trojans and enter their city during the Trojan war. The made-in-Turkey Trojan horse, as the red flag with the white crescent and the star indicates, corroborates the narrative that Turkey is the mastermind behind the border events, using stratagems of this nature to implement a secret agenda to damage Europe by sending over dangerous, radical Islamists. Despite the triumphant image of jihadists, Greece is the ultimate winner because it is historically superior, for having invented the Trojan horse. A primordial understanding of nations is evident as reference to ‘Hellas’ instead of Greece is the characteristic way the Greek nationalist dictatorship of the 1960s referred to Greece.

Another tweet (Figure 4) clearly represented the events as a conflict of civilizations, the oriental versus the occidental, drawing from antiquity. It noted,

#Greece guarding the Thermopylae of the Western world once again. This time you can help. Pressure your gvmts to provide us with military assistance & to #Sanction_Turkey now. Our
borders are your borders. Our way of life is your way of life. Take action now. #IStandWithGreece

(Example 8: 29 February 2020)

A photo of a barbed wire in front of policemen standing underneath a sign with the inscription ‘Greece Welcome’, and the Greek flag, completes the tweet. Thermopylae refers to a place in Greece, literally meaning Hot Gates, where a battle between Persians and Greeks took place. The Persians outnumbered the Greeks but the latter demonstrated enormous bravery, according to the same narrative. In this context, the Hot Gates under siege are those of the entire Western world. The portrayal of the barbed wire, and security forces in front of the welcoming sign, is telling of the paradoxes of borders as non/entry points.

**Articulations of Europeanness: #Europe they are at the gates.** This theme focuses on the ways the network’s tweets represented Europe and Europeanness, identifying a tension between ideas about Europe at the symbolic level (e.g. Christian values), and the EU and its leadership, as a failed promoter of European values.

#IStandWithGreece’ influencers were sending a ‘wake-up’ call to the leadership, warning them of the imminent threat against the whole of Europe. One characteristic tweet noted that ‘#Europe they are at the gates’ (Example 9: 1 March 2020), and another read,
Europe, as you sleep well tonight, remember it is the Greek people who are keeping Erdogan’s hordes of illegal immigrants out of your countries. We will continue to do this, but do you stand with Greece? #IStandWithGreece. (Example 10: 3 March 2020)

‘Europe’ here is most likely used to refer to western European countries – typically the desired countries of destination for refugees – and the EU’s powerful decision makers. ‘Europe’ is represented as not wanting these ‘illegal migrants’ but conveniently expecting Greece to do the job for them. The tweet is essentially inquiring whether Europe will ever show solidarity with its ailing members, therefore casting doubts about its role and intentions. These accusations are not really meant to be othering, in the sense that the attempt to present Europe as morally inferior or lacking in bravery is not done in order to distance it from the Self. They are rather a form of provocation and a cry for help and union. Nevertheless, the opening sentence implies a level of hypocrisy from Europe because, while Greeks are in a brutal fight with an enemy keeping all Europeans safe, Europe is passive (‘sleeping well’).

Influencers recurrently reinforced the long-standing divide between affluent Western Europe and the more exposed and victimized South and East for allegedly suffering more from migration due to its geographical proximity to areas of conflict. In the following tweet, top influencers are cheering central Eastern Europe (probably referring to Hungary and Poland), for pulling its weight and defending Europe at large, while western Europe would not help, thus picturing Europe as a fragmented union:

Last night, the migrants bussed to the Greek border by Turkish authorities continued to attack Greek Border Guards with the use of rocks, fireworks & tear gas cannisters Western Europe won’t help #Greece, #CentralEasternEurope must do it! #GreeceUnderAttack #IStandWithGreece. (Example 11: 7 March 2020)

Those severely targeted by the network were certain high-level EU politicians. In the following, the EC President is characterized as a ‘disgrace’ and Erdogan as a ‘tyrant’:

The @eucopresident is a disgrace expressing condolences to #Erdogen – Why is the #EU appeasing this tyrant & his rogue, blackmailing, genocidal, terror state? They should support #Greece against this Erdogan organised invasion #GreeceUnderAttack #IStandWithGreece #Cyprus #Idlib (Example 12: 1 March 2020)

Simultaneously, Greek-affiliated influencers used Twitter to convince Europeans to take action to protect Greece and by extent, the entire ingroup/Self. This is illustrative of a desire to articulate the Self as genuinely European:

Fellow Europeans, YOU must take a stand. Do YOU want us to be the bridge to your home? WE must find a solution to this, TOGETHER. Please apply pressure to your politicians. This is serious. #IStandWithGreece #GreeceDefendsEurope #Greece_under_attack. (Example 13: 4 March 2020)

The tweet makes a clear distinction between ordinary ‘fellow’, Europeans and political leaders. Ordinary Europeans are represented as the real carriers of Europe’s ideals for
union and internal solidarity in juxtaposition to the political elites who undermine authentic Europeanness. A video showing mostly young male migrants, one of them shouting in English ‘We want to go to Europe’ and adding that ‘Your country is a bridge to us’, completes the tweet by supporting the network’s main argument that Greece was protecting Europe from unwanted others who aimed at reaching destinations outside Greece. Interestingly, the speaker does not really consider Greece as Europe since he notes that they want to go to Europe, which is a striking contrast to the network’s symbolic representation of Greece as the ultimate heroic European, or as one Twitterer noted the ‘foundation of Europe’, adding that ‘If Greece fails, the rest of Europe will fail too’ (29 February 2020).

Christian Europe was another assertion of the network grounded around the idea that Evros was not only the border of Greece and Europe, but also of Christianity. Indicative hashtags foregrounded this assertion, such as #LetsReturnToChristianity and #ChristianityUnderAttack, while one tweet noted, ‘Greece is Europe! Islam is not! #IStandWithGreece’ (Example 14: 1 March 2020). Finally, a tweet read,

Migrants using bolt-cutters, trying to destroy the Greek border fence and storm the border of Greece/Europe/Christianity. Meanwhile, Merkel, Macron and Ursula von der Leyen are doing NOTHING! (Example 15: 8 March 2020)

Interestingly, Christian identity is treated by influencers as a unifying element between Greece and Europe, silencing Greece’s Orthodoxy which for Greek nationalists was, in the past, viewed as a dividing element distancing Greece from other EU member states (cf. Molokotos-Liederman, 2003).

**Discussion and conclusion: the ‘pawns’ discourse and why it matters**

This study sought to answer *who was othered* and *why* in a Twitter debate around #IStandWithGreece, triggered by border incidents between Greece and Turkey in early 2020. The tweets studied belonged to the top influencers of what we have already identified as a ‘network of intolerance’ promoting ideologies from within the far-right, cutting across national contexts of the Global north (Avraamidou et al., 2021). Focusing on the network’s English and Greek tweets, we inevitably located othering processes at the intersections of transnational far-right perspectives, which share rhetoric and ideologies (Levi and Rothberg, 2018), and of Greek nationalism, therefore bringing new insights on migrant othering in social media. Subsequently, we reflect on the extent to which the othering promoted by these antimigrant influencers may serve mainstream EU migration politics.

Our findings yielded the othering of three actors of the events, Turkey, migrants and Europe. Mirroring earlier media and social media research, othering of migrants was centred around the cultural and security threat (KhosraviNik et al., 2012; Lynn and Lea, 2003) and the national threat (Bozdag, 2020).

While the predominant representation of migrants during the 2015 ‘crisis’ was mostly that of a ‘faceless, voiceless flood of Numbers’ (Nikunen, 2019: 415), in this
network’s tweets, we located their representation as ‘pawns’. According to this, migrants are likened to a chess piece, with no value in their own right, as they are literally pushed towards Europe by another actor, Erdogan’s Turkey, who elevated them into a sizable threat by turning them into ‘invaders’. This representation is evident in recurrent references across the three themes that migrants ‘have been bussed to the border’, that they are ‘Erdogan’s hordes’, that Turkey was weaponizing them, or Hopkins’ tweet that Erdogan was threatening to ‘flood Europe with Muslims’. Moreover, the Trojan horse analogy is illustrative of this migrant pawn representation because, had it not been for the made-in Turkey wooden horse, jihadists would not have made it to Europe. This dehumanizing, non-agentic representation of migrants exacerbates an understanding of them expendable, but it does not contradict their representation as ‘invaders’. In contrast, the two are strategically consolidated because migrants’ agency to pose a threat depended exclusively on Turkey; they can invade only because Erdogan moves them across the chessboard towards Europe. Therefore, their fate is Turkey’s responsibility, which has willingly, if not purposefully, sacrificed them as pawns (see also Hoops et al., 2016). Europe is also wiped of any quilt or responsibility for these people because they are merely seen as serving the other actor’s aims. The consolidation of these representations (pawn/invaders) has implications for the future; it provides another argument to justify Europe’s border securitization, foregrounding its representation as a paradoxical other, the fallen Self, for not rising to the opportunity to decisively protect its sovereignty and identity through more securitization.

#IStandWithGreece influencers homogenized people at the border as Muslim fundamentalists, which is common in anti-Muslim online debates that ignore the complex identities of asylum seekers (Evolvi, 2019). The representation of ‘Middle-Eastern masculinity as threatening’ (Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016: 179), a common strategy of Twitterers using #refugeesNOTwelcome in 2015, was used in this network too. This allowed Twitterers to exacerbate the bond between the people at the borders and Turkey, and the corresponding representation of the events as a religious and cultural conflict, as the Crescent versus the Cross metaphor illustrates. Similarly, the network endorsed Helleno- and Eurocentric representations of modern and ancient history in which Turkey was portrayed as an eternally malevolent actor in the geo-political chessboard. Various motivated historical analogies were mobilized (e.g. genocides and invasions) to convince readers that Turkey’s enabling of would-be terrorists into European soil stems naturally from its historical desire to conquer or destroy Europe. Notably, Turkey has long been represented as one of Europe’s key historical external others alongside Russia (Morozov and Rumelili, 2012). Simultaneously, Christian-Greece is seen as protecting the West from barbarian others from the East due to its position at the cross-roads between West and East (Tziampiris, 2015), as the Thermopylae battle analogy claimed. Greece is a separate nation but its Europeanness is taken-for-granted, both by Greek-affiliated and non-Greek-affiliated influencers, despite this narrative being disrupted by migrant people explaining that they want to ‘go to Europe’, implying that Greece, to them, is not Europe. The EU-Greece relationship is even more complex: Greek Twitterers called for solidarity, but they were rather disappointed or expected little from European leadership, as evident in the rhetorical question: ‘but do you (Europe) stand with Greece?’.

The othering mainly of Western Europe was motivated by representing the EU and its leadership as passive hypocrites, accused of not protecting their own people and washing
their hands instead. That Europe is passive and hypocritical when it comes to migration crises matches earlier media criticism but from a pro-migrant perspective (Kadianaki et al., 2018). Effectively, the EU was failing to protect the network’s racialized notion of Europeanness as the Christian, occidental self, and keep out those migrants who not only posed a tangible threat by violating its sovereignty but who on top of that were unworthy of coming to Europe, and by extent of becoming Europeans, due to their Muslim culture (Wodak, 2015: 42). This is evidence of a strategic deployment of both Euroscepticism and Eurocentrism to exclude others in far-right transnational discourse. Again, the self is personified in the image of Greece and its soldiers, who are flagging the cross and guarding Europe’s borders to safeguard its space, but also its identity and values from vicious anti-heroes. Europe and European leaders are being requested to follow the lead of Greek defenders.

The #IStandWithGreece network demanded border securitization in its most extreme form for the global north, and not just Greece’s border with Turkey. For example, metaphors and historical analogies such as Erdogan being likened to Hitler were used to not only other Turkey, but to also authorize killings of migrants. Therefore, the network’s pseudo-negation of Nazism, that we located, is rather evidence of its partial identification with it, and of the ingroup it is constructing, an intolerant Self.

Migrant othering was, in this instance too, begetting border securitization and militarization (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018), which ironically is not too far from Europe’s concurrent border politics. Yet, these Twitterers assumed that Europe was too tolerant, promoting rather flexible migration policies. Thus, they construe the event as a border management problem to which the only solution is the implementation of stricter border and migration policies. Simultaneously, it is also grounding a demand to protect Europeanness, illustrating how exclusionary border politics and identity politics are mutually constituted. The clear demand of a Twitterer to Europeans to protect ‘our way of life’ resembles the initial naming of a controversial newly introduced portfolio of the EU Commission, ‘Protecting our European Way of Life’, which was altered to ‘Promoting our European Way of Life’, after backlash (Golesorkhi, 2021). The reference of another Twitterer to Greek soldiers as ‘holding the line’, is almost identical to Von der Leyen’s call for Europe to ‘hold the line’, mentioned earlier. Effectively, the network and the EU agree that keeping unwanted others out is (also) about maintaining our racialized Europeanness (De Genova, 2017). We argue therefore that these seemingly marginal voices from within the far-right that bonded around #IStandWithGreece were serving not a marginal political agenda, but rather the concurrent EU migration agenda at a supranational and national level, pushing it to reach new extremes, such as killing Muslim border crossers in cold blood. We conclude that this network of intolerance, #IStandWithGreece, functioned rather as Europe’s alter-ego mouthpiece, saying the unsayable using social media and their affordances. Social media thus provided the symbolic means for the normalization of a ruthless reality at Europe’s land and sea borders.

To conclude, Europe is shown in yet another mediated debate about migration as being threatened by another alleged ‘influx’ of migrants. This time, migrants were represented as pawns of a more vicious other, Turkey. The othering we located may be common because fierce opposition to migration, and particularly to Muslim migrants from the East, as circulated in various media and particularly by the far-right, is long-standing. In their simplicity
and very obvious essentialization of identities as fixed in time; these representations can be adjusted to almost every border event; they are the archetype of a Eurocentric exclusionary antimigrant discourse infused with nationalism. Influencers regardless of their national affiliations put similar emphasis on the need for border securitization. Regarding the othering of Turkey, we observed emphasis on both its historical turbulent past with Greece, relevant to Greek nationalism, and on its peculiar relationship with Europe and the west, relevant to Eurocentric approaches across the global north and simplistic dichotomizations of the civilized, Christian self and the inferior, Muslim other. The two were reinforcing each other for the common goal discussed, border securitization. Future research could shed more light into how social media offers space for this transnational dialogue of antimigrant voices to evolve and reinforce each other, during other border events. The subsequent mediated discourse about the mid-2021 Afghan events and those at the Poland-Belarus border later the same year perhaps exemplifies this as it appears to promote seemingly non-transcended distinctions between us and the other, with the undeserving other being ‘weaponized’ by long-standing enemies (Turkey or Russia and its puppet states), and during which Europe’s member-states, in proximity, flag their national interests. Therefore, the ‘pawns’ representation returns to justify atrocities, and ultimately, to legitimize the continuation of an exclusionary, repressive and oppressive European migration regime which is racialized. Future research can better warrant the affinity of these extremist discourses with the mainstream and the politics they underpin, as identifying othering processes in social media is the first step towards uncovering and therefore resisting the restrictive political agenda that they feed into.

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Supplemental material
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Notes
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