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Fragile Buffer Zones.
The Externalization Dynamism in the Field
of Border Security and Possible Alternatives

Abstract

For decades, the externalization of border control has been a central means of European border and migration policy. It is at the external border of the EU where the dynamism between the European center and the European peripheries manifests. The center of the EU externalizes border control tasks to the member states with European external borders, whereas the external border states and the EU as a whole externalize border control tasks to the periphery outside the Schengen borders. This principle is fragile, vulnerable and in large parts dysfunctional. Nevertheless, no alternative seems to be feasible for the EU. But a different way of dealing with those seeking protection, which would actually be in the EU's genuine interest, is certainly possible and is discussed in this article.

Keywords

Fragile Pufferzonen. Die Externalisierungsdynamik
im europäischen Grenzschutz und mögliche Alternativen

Die Externalisierung des Grenzschutzes ist seit Jahrzehnten ein zentraler Pfeiler der europäischen Grenz- und Migrationspolitik. An den Außengrenzen der EU manifestiert sich dabei die Dynamik zwischen dem europäischen Zentrum und den europäischen Peripherien. Das Zentrum der EU externalisiert Grenzkontrollaufgaben an die Mitgliedstaaten mit europäischen Au-

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ßengrenzen, während die Außengrenzstaaten und die EU als Ganze Grenz-
kontrollaufgaben an die Peripherie außerhalb der Schengengrenzen externa-
lisieren. Dieses Prinzip ist fragil, vulnerabel und in großen Teilen dysfunk-
tional. Dennoch scheint für die EU keine Alternative dazu zu existieren. Ein
anderer Umgang mit Schutzsuchenden, der letztlich auch im genuinen Inter-
esse der EU wäre, ist aber durchaus möglich und wird in diesem Artikel
diskutiert.

Schlagwörter

Externalisierung, Grenzschutz, Zentrum, Peripherie, Außengrenze, Migrati-
onsmanagement

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1 Introduction

Events in the Spanish exclave of Ceuta dominated international headlines for
a few days in the spring of 2021: presumably due to an upset over the behav-
ior of the Spanish government in the context of the Western Sahara conflict,
the Moroccan government loosened border controls with the European
Union. As a result, thousands of people arrived in Ceuta from Morocco. Ini-
tially, the local authorities seemed overwhelmed by the situation, but mi-
grants were quickly deported back to Morocco and the Spanish side of the
border was soon massively reinforced. Shortly after, Morocco re-established
border controls in line with the criteria agreed upon between Spain and the
European Union. The Mobility Partnership Agreement (relaunched in 2019,
see European Commission 2022) between the European Union and Morocco
is part of the European externalization policy in the field of border security
and migration.[1]

For decades, the externalization of border control – and thus the external-
ization of combating irregular migration as one of the central cross-border
challenges border control directs – has been a central means of European
border and migration policy. It is at the external border of the European Un-
ion where the dynamism between the European center and the European
peripheries manifests. How externalization and the dynamism of Europe are
connected is the subject of this article. I will first introduce the theoretical
approach of the »Dynamism of Europe«, developed by Austrian sociologist

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1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *EuropeNow* 46, February 2022:
https://www.europenowjournal.org/issues/. It has been significantly expanded for this
publication.

Georg Vobruba, and then illustrate this further with a focus on externalization, using Italy as an example. Subsequently, I show that the principle of externalizing border control tasks in the dynamism of Europe is fragile, vulnerable and dysfunctional. But there would be numerous alternatives to deal with those seeking protection and I discuss three promising scenarios at the end of this essay.

2 The Dynamism of Europe

The »Dynamism of Europe« is a theoretical approach developed by Austrian sociologist Georg Vobruba (Vobruba 2005) to explain the integration and expansion of the European Union in the pattern of concentric circles. According to this approach, the development of the European Union is decisively dependent on the interactions and interdependencies between the center and the periphery of Europe. The center of the European Union is formed by politically and economically stable states. Peripheries are integrated at different levels around this ›affluent core‹. The further a state is from the center, the higher the prosperity gap compared to the core. The different zones of prosperity are separated from each other by borders with different degrees of permeability. A ›political exchange ratio‹ has emerged between the center and the periphery; while the periphery undertakes shielding the center from cross-border problems – thus acting as a buffer zone – the center promises support, free movement of persons, and opportunities to participate in its prosperity. The pattern of concentric circles ensures the preservation of the status quo for the states of the center and development potential for the states of the periphery. Vobruba's theory can be specified by an important distinction, namely that between the inner European and the outer European periphery. The periphery *within* and the periphery *outside* the European Union diverge considerably from each other in their interests and interactions with the center and therefore require specific consideration, which I will present here.

Initiated by the Schengen Agreements (1985, 1990) with the abolition of checks at their common borders, the European Union has taken a significant step towards integration, which has a direct impact on the dynamism between the center and inner European peripheries. Cross-border migration to an inner European periphery state now potentially means entry into all states of the European Union. The free movement of persons within the European Union has therefore led to an increased interest of the European core-states in controlling the events of external borders. Along with this, the stability of the outer European periphery continues to gain importance.

The free movement of persons can be regarded as the starting point of the European border regime. It correlates with the externalization of border control and the establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex in 2005. In terms of the theory of the dynamism of Europe, these developments can be identified as mechanisms to maintain the buffer zone within and around the European Union. With regard to the European border regime, the pattern of concentric circles means the center externalizes border control tasks to the member states with European external borders, whereas the external border states and the European Union externalize border control tasks to the periphery outside the Schengen borders.

3 Externalization from the Center to the Inner and Outer European Periphery

The externalization dynamism between the center and the inner European periphery (the periphery *within* the European Union) can be exemplified in the southern European border state of Italy. On the one hand, the member states of the European core and the European Commission support the country in controlling its external borders. This is mainly done through the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex, which has been continuously expanded since 2005. Frontex is currently conducting Operation Themis in the Central Mediterranean Sea to relieve Italy in border control, surveillance, and search and rescue. Moreover, the European Union has been implementing the so-called hotspot approach since 2015, which is an attempt to assist Italy and other external border states in the registration and identification of migrants by involving Frontex and other European agencies (see Frontex 2021).

On the other hand, the states of the European center have established mechanisms like the Dublin Regulation, which assigns the responsibility to process asylum applications primarily to the first signatory country an asylum seeker enters, thus externalizing responsibility mainly to Italy and the other inner European periphery states (see Triandafyllidou 2014). Responsibility for border security is also clearly externalized to these states, as is repeatedly made clear at the discursive level; political bodies of the European center alternately appeal to Italy's responsibility for effective border control and compliance with rules or threaten to reject refugees to Italy or to reintroduce border checks (see Hilpert 2015, p. 114–116). »Italy must sort out its own problems« and »solidarity will only emerge if the member states at the EU's external borders – with support from the EU budget – take all necessary legal and financial means to strengthen the surveillance of the external bor-

ders« are just two quotes from German and French interior ministers, respectively, from recent years that illustrate this attitude towards Italy.[2]

In both aspects of the externalization dynamism between the center and the inner European periphery, namely support and transfer of responsibility, it is essential that combating or managing irregular migration takes place on Italian territory or in Italian waters. The problems of the periphery are to be solved in the periphery so as not to endanger the stability of the European center.

For Italy, this means the border is not only a national border but also a European one; the border is doubly coded, as Vobruba theoretically describes it. Italy accepts the additional supranational tasks in border control, but demands comprehensive support from the states of the center and recognition of the efforts made by external border states.

Therefore, the European external border states have a strong interest in establishing an additional buffer zone against irregular migration in a further concentric circle, namely in the neighborhood of the European Union – the periphery *outside* the European Union. Regarding this outer European periphery, the principle is to shift border control tasks forward. These are to take place outside European territory, so that irregular migrants do not even get close to their destination. To this end, both European peripheral states and the European Union have concluded a series of agreements with third countries. Research roughly distinguishes between two forms of externalized border control: the outsourcing of border control tasks to third countries and the implementation of border control by European border guards on non-European territory (for an overview see e.g., Gaibazzi et al. 2017). In the first case, third countries in the European neighborhood are mandated and supported to prevent migrants from irregularly entering the European Union by controlling their borders according to European Union standards and by establishing detention centers to immobilize them. The second case includes all measures of migration control in which the European Union, although shifting responsibility for border control to third countries, continues to act as the central actor of implementation. Here, both legal entry procedures (e.g., visa policies) and physical control measures aiming to prevent illegal entry are externalized to the non-European territory.

An example to illustrate the comprehensive bilateral agreements with third countries is Italy's cooperation with Libya. Italy concluded a series of comprehensive agreements with Libya in the early 2000s, culminating in the

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2 First quote: Hans-Peter Friedrich, German Minister of the Interior (2011); second quote: Joint statement by the German and French Ministers of the Interior Thomas De Maizière and Bernard Cazeneuve, 2015; both quoted in my study Hilpert (2020), p. 229.

friendship treaty signed by prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2008. This included very extensive cooperation to combat irregular migration. When Gaddafi's regime collapsed in 2011, the resulting instability of the country became a central problem of Italian migration policy, which was followed by the laborious reconstruction of the agreements with Libya (see Morone 2017).

At the European level, Frontex is equipped with comprehensive powers to implement third-country agreements. The Agency cooperates with the direct outer European periphery, but also with other third countries in the form of operational cooperation (e.g., information exchange, trainings, and joint operations such as in the Africa Frontex Intelligence Community), in working arrangements (e.g., with Belarus, Morocco, or Turkey), in technical assistance projects (e.g., in North Africa), or within the framework of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility. Frontex also arranges and implements readmission agreements for the Member States of the European Union. In exchange for their cooperation and support the European Union promises visa facilitation, import facilitation, or benefits in the context of development policy. However, some of the agreements also contain sanctions in case of non-compliance.[3] In 2019, Frontex's competencies in the agreements with third countries and the repatriation sector were once again significantly strengthened (see European Union 2019).

As an intermediate stage of the externalization circle in the dynamism of Europe, it can also be observed that the inner European peripheral states outsource border control tasks and the management of irregular migration to peripheries within their own states, namely to islands (or enclaves in the case of Spain). Migratory movements are directed to them and the authorities on the islands are often (initially) given sole responsibility for the care of the migrants. The governments of the border states have been demanding more support from the European Union for years while the local authorities on Lesbos, Lampedusa, or Ceuta are appealing to their central governments to relieve them. However, the latter often uses the exacerbations at the territorial edges of the European Union as a means of exerting pressure on the European center (see Cuttitta 2014).

4 Fragile, Vulnerable, and Dysfunctional

It is not surprising that the principle of externalizing border control tasks in the dynamism of Europe is fragile. If a concentric circle is no longer able or

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3 For an overview on Frontex see Kalkman (2020), on the current Frontex operations: Frontex (2022).

willing to maintain its buffer function, this results in immediate stability problems for the European center – in the form of irregular migrations via third countries or the inner European periphery and the associated consequential problems (such as protests among the population). When the buffer zones disappear, the external border becomes unmediated for the affluent core due to the free movement of persons within the European Union.

In practice, the buffer function of the European neighborhood in North Africa has recently been severely shaken, not only in the short term – as in Ceuta – but also structurally in the context of the so-called Arab Spring. Political instability increased the incentive to flee and therefore new migration movements took the externalization policy to its limits. With the collapse of the regimes after the Arab Spring, the gatekeeping arrangements with the European Union eventually lost their validity. The outer European periphery was not able to shield the center from cross-border problems, especially from migration, anymore. So the political exchange ratio between center and periphery described by Vobruba did not hold out any longer. The regime collapse led to a dysfunction of the outer European periphery.

This in turn created conflicts between the center and inner European periphery and triggered a ›migration crisis‹ – perceived in the political and public discourse within the European Union – and in its immediate aftermath a ›Schengen crisis‹, i.e., a crisis of the free movement of persons in the European Union. Additionally, the inner European periphery states were no longer able to act as a buffer zone. European center states first tried to avoid the problem by temporarily reintroducing border controls with them, but then quickly revitalized the outer European externalization mechanisms. The European external border states also massively pushed the externalization policy, as the example of Libya shows. Particularly prominent at the European level is the ›EU Turkey Statement‹ from 2016, in which the payment of a total of 6 billion euros for the support of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the expansion of Turkish migration management, the establishment of refugee reception centers in Turkey, and returns of irregular migrants apprehended in Greece were agreed (see Yildiz 2016). This gatekeeping arrangement has already been broken several times by the Turkish government and is currently renegotiated.

The externalization dynamism in the field of border security and migration seems to have no alternative for the European Union – despite the massive negative experiences in recent years, the de facto dysfunction of the periphery, and the obvious dependencies on partners with very questionable human rights records. The European border and migration management system is built on externalization. This, in contrast to the fragility of the externaliza-

tion dynamism, may indeed be surprising. There would be numerous alternatives to deal with those seeking protection as a state or union of states.

5 Different Approaches to those Seeking Protection at the Borders of the European Union

A comprehensive European asylum system and safe and legal access routes would be central to a new way of dealing with refugees at the borders of the European Union. In the logic of the dynamism of Europe, it would reduce the incentives to shift border control tasks forward. However, it is a matter of common knowledge that the European Union's heterogeneity and disunity on the issue of migration are hampering this process. The member states have very different asylum and migration systems and interests. Despite permanent appeals and proposals from the Commission, they cannot agree on a common migration policy that goes beyond the border protection paradigm based on externalization policy (see Oltmer 2021). Pragmatically, the Commission's proposed New Pact on Migration and Asylum (September 2020) also continues to place a clear focus on the externalization of border control to the outer European periphery and the fight against irregular migration (see European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2021). Even if one accepts this heterogeneity within the European Union, alternatives to deal with those seeking protection are certainly conceivable. Three scenarios in particular, which are being discussed in academia and politics, appear interesting to me. They share a complex understanding of migration that does not focus on combating irregular migration and the realization of repatriations, as is the case with the current externalization policy.

On the one hand, the strengthening of legal alternatives to irregular immigration to Europe apart from a common right of asylum can be a way of dealing with refugees in a different manner. This might be achieved through the further development and expansion of humanitarian admission programs (as we know them for Syrian refugees), humanitarian visas, and resettlements (in cooperation with the UNHCR, among others). This legal and safe entry of particularly vulnerable people into the European Union, for example through an EU-wide resettlement program or national programs, cannot replace a common European asylum system. However, it can be a pragmatic way to give refugees perspective and thus reduce irregular entry into the European Union as well as the need for third-country agreements on border control.[4]

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4 On the issue of admission programs, see Foblets and Leboeuf (2020); Welfens et al. (2019).

Equally pragmatic, on the other hand, seems to be the approach of no longer waiting for a common European asylum agreement at all. Instead, a group of willing member states could develop and implement a common concept for dealing with refugees that allows both access to the asylum system in the European Union and burden-sharing among the participating states. Ideas of such voluntary intergovernmental coalitions as a substitute for a Europe-wide solution of the migration issue are not new. In the debate between the center and the inner European periphery about a fair distribution of burdens, they were and are a central topos. They have been discussed in very different and substantive orientations and have also been practiced in some cases. For example, under French and German initiative, a solidarity-based distribution of migrants rescued in the Mediterranean Sea was agreed upon in 2019 in a (small) group of member states (›Malta declaration‹, see Carrera and Cortinovis 2019). To be a real alternative such intergovernmental alliances would of course have to include far more comprehensive cooperation and standards in the admission of refugees. The new German government, for example, is planning to actively promote a new »coalition of receptive member states« (SPD et al. 2021); however, it is with the aim of coming closer to a European asylum system. It remains to be seen how this could be designed in concrete terms. Another proposal for a solution is made by the European Commission with its ›flexible solidarity‹ model. In this regard, propositions for a de-centralization of the admission policy with the increasing involvement of cities and municipalities that are willing to take in migrants are also interesting. These cities are fighting more and more for a greater say in migration policy and many declare their willingness to take in more people than they are obliged to via national distribution keys.[5] That such heterogeneous, multidimensional models of coalitions of the willing would not remain without consequences for the European unification process can only be mentioned here as a side note.

A third alternative would be to reorient cooperation with third countries on a new, holistic basis. For that to happen, the agreements with the outer European periphery would not have to rely unilaterally on incentives or threats to prevent irregular migration to Europe or to repatriate migrants to these countries. Instead, migration would have to be addressed as a complex issue and the multilayered interests of the periphery would have to be considered in the agreements. In the sense of »self-interested aid« (Vobruba 2016, p. 167), the European center could thus succeed in maintaining the

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5 The platform moving-cities, funded by German foundations, brings together cities and initiatives that are committed to a new, ›solidarity-based‹ European migration policy: https://moving-cities.eu/.

buffer zone described by Vobruba in the dynamism of Europe in a more stable and balanced way.

That a fundamental change in the practice of externalization is probably not to be expected under the new proposal of the European Commission; however, this has been shown by e.g., Guild (2020) and Bendel (2021). »Instead of establishing partnerships on an equal footing, the EU has in many cases implemented a ›carrot and stick‹ policy. […] It should be carefully explored in each case if these renewed or newly developed partnerships can, this time, avoid the risk of cooperating with unreliable partners, of promoting securitization and returns at the expense of more comprehensive migration policies« (Bendel 2021).

The externalization dynamism in the field of border security and migration is very vulnerable to crisis. Third country agreements have proven time and again to be extremely fragile, at various times they have been completely dysfunctional. The inner European periphery is also increasingly unable or unwilling to act as an effective buffer zone for the European center. Moreover, in Morocco and Turkey, for example, we have seen that the European Union becomes vulnerable to blackmail through migration deals. This could be interpreted as a loss of sovereignty, which can hardly be in the interest of even the anti-immigration actors of the European Union. The need to develop alternatives to the practice of externalization, of new ways to deal with those seeking protection at the borders of the European Union, seems to be in the genuine interest of the European Union as a whole and its member states.

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