

Nordic Exceptionalism? How Scandinavian Border and Coast Guards Rationalize Their Participation in Frontex Operations



NJMR NORDIC JOURNAL OF
MIGRATION RESEARCH

RESEARCH

ELINE WAERP 

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Scandinavian border and coast guards seconded to Frontex operations understand their participation in them. Drawing on interviews with Swedish and Danish border and coast guards, the paper introduces the notion of Nordic exceptionalism in order to explain how they view their contribution to Frontex operations as positive for Frontex, other member states, and refugees and migrants themselves. *Nordic exceptionalism* refers to the interviewees' perception of higher moral standards and stronger work ethic in the Nordic countries vis-à-vis in the Southern, Central, and Eastern European countries. The paper explores how the Scandinavian border and coast guards' belief that refugees and migrants would be worse off if they were not present at sea rationalizes their participation in Frontex operations, despite their concerns regarding poor fundamental rights protections. Advancing the notion of *banal securitization*, the paper argues that although the Scandinavian border and coast guards discursively resist the criminalization of migration, they acquiesce to its securitization through their continued participation in Frontex operations. Nordic exceptionalism thus facilitates the banal securitization of migration by inoculating the interviewees from the harmful consequences of their work.

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR:

Eline Waerp

Friedrich-Alexander-
University (FAU) Center for
Human Rights Erlangen-
Nuremberg (CHREN),
Germany

eline.waerp@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

Nordic exceptionalism;
Frontex; Border guards;
Banal securitization; EU
border control

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Waerp, E. 2025. Nordic
Exceptionalism? How
Scandinavian Border and
Coast Guards Rationalize
Their Participation in
Frontex Operations. *Nordic
Journal of Migration
Research*, 15(3): 7,
pp. 1–17. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/njmr.855](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.855)

In 2020, the European Border and Coast Guard agency (Frontex) became embroiled in the largest pushback accusations against the agency to date, when investigative journalists revealed systematic pushbacks carried out by the Greek coast guard in the Aegean Sea under the auspices of Frontex's Operation Poseidon (Christides et al. 2021; Waters, Freudenthal & Williams 2020). The allegations sparked intense media attention and critique by civil society actors, who have pointed to mounting evidence of Frontex's disrespect of fundamental rights since the agency's first operations off the West African coast in 2005 (BVMN 2020; HRW 2011). The claims that Frontex turned a blind eye to *pushbacks* – a practice deemed illegal by international and EU law, where refugees and migrants are barred from applying for asylum (Moreno-Lax 2017; Shachar 2020) – in its operational area led to a cascade of events. This included an internal investigation by Frontex's Management Board, a fact-finding investigation by the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), scrutiny by the European Commission's Directorate-General (DG) of Migration and Home Affairs, as well as an investigation by the European anti-fraud office (OLAF), who acted on an insider tip (European Parliament 2021b; Frontex 2021). Frontex's Executive Director denied the allegations until OLAF found evidence of senior level knowledge and cover-up of the pushbacks, whereupon he resigned since the agency's mandate had "silently but effectively been changed" (Barigazzi & Lynch 2022; Christides & Lüdke 2022).

These events tie in with a large body of literature which asserts that migration has become both criminalized and securitized in the EU over the last three decades, and that Frontex, as the operational agency in charge of protecting the external borders, has played a large part in this (Campesi 2022; Léonard & Kaunert 2020; Perkowski, Stierl & Burridge 2023). Less attention, however, has been given to how border and coast guards seconded to Frontex operations *themselves* understand their participation in them and negotiate this critique. Previous literature has focused on the discrepancy between Frontex's humanitarian discourse and its securitizing practices on the ground (Aas & Gundhus 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015b), as well as how border guards and migration officials cope with the resulting ethical dilemmas in their work (Borrelli 2022; DeBono 2019). By drawing on six interviews with Scandinavian border and coast guards seconded to Frontex operations at the South-Eastern land and sea borders, the paper contributes to this literature by examining how the interviewees resist the criminalization of migration but contribute to its securitization through their everyday routine work.

In the securitization literature, securitizing acts are generally attributed to speeches made by European policymakers (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998) or mundane practices carried out by bureaucrats working in the EU institutions (Bigo 2014; Bigo, Bonditti & Olsson 2016). Consequently, securitization tends to be treated as either explicit or tacit (except for Campesi 2022; Léonard & Kaunert 2020). In this article, I seek to bridge this norm/exception binary by treating securitization as a scale which oscillates between overt securitizations and implicit but nonetheless harmful ones (Wærp 2024). I apply this theoretical framework to analyze how the Scandinavian border and coast guards understand their role in Frontex operations, arguing that despite discursively resisting the criminalization of migration, they accept its securitization by continuing to participate in these security-oriented operations. I therefore distinguish between criminalization and securitization, the former which refers to the merging

of crime control and migration control (Aas & Bosworth 2013; Franko 2019) and the latter which denotes the treatment of migration as a security threat (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998). I treat criminalization, in the form of pushbacks and violations of fundamental rights, as more visible than securitization, which in this paper takes on a less conspicuous form as a general mindset towards irregularized migration (Bigo 2002).

This distinction is useful for my elaboration of *Nordic exceptionalism*, which refers to the interviewees' belief that their own moral standards and work ethic are superior to that of their Southern, Eastern, and Central European counterparts (see Aas & Gundhus 2015 for similar findings; and Emilsson 2018 and Bevelander & Hellström 2019 for a similar use of the term "Swedish exceptionalism"). I examine how this sense of superiority rationalizes the Scandinavian border and coast guards' participation in Frontex operations since they understand it to be for refugees and migrants own good, who would be better off in their hands than the Greek or Italian coast guards'. The results indicate that Nordic exceptionalism blinds the Scandinavian border and coast guards to their own banal securitization of migration by contrasting it with the explicit criminalization by their non-Nordic peers, which allows them to deflect blame and distance themselves from the suffering and deaths at the EU's external borders (see Borrelli 2018).

The paper proceeds as follows: the first section details the concepts of banal securitization and Nordic exceptionalism, as well as how they speak to the literatures on securitization and criminalization. The second section describes how the interviews were carried out, while the third section explores how Nordic exceptionalism serves as a rationalizing strategy for the interviewees. A brief conclusion follows at the end.

BANAL SECURITIZATION AND NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

The Copenhagen school of security studies draws attention to the discursive and intersubjective construction of securitization, whereby securitizing actors (e.g. policymakers) frame an issue (e.g. migration) as a security threat to a referent object (e.g. the EU), in trying to convince an audience (e.g. the public) that exceptional measures are necessary. These "securitizing moves" hence need to be accepted by an audience in order to be successful (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998: 25). Despite this important role afforded to an imaginary audience in securitization theory, it has been criticized for being both under-theorized and under-researched (Aradau 2004; Balzacq 2005; Côté 2016). The paper contributes to this gap in the literature by focusing on the role of seconded border and coast guards to Frontex operations, treating them as a relevant audience for Frontex's securitization of migration and examining how they resist and/or reproduce this securitization. It thus departs from the assumption that migration has already become securitized in EU border control and that Frontex is a securitizing actor (Follis 2018; Horii 2016; Paul 2017).

The paper therefore contributes empirically to the literatures on the securitization and criminalization of migration (see Aas & Bosworth 2013; Franko 2019; van der Woude, Barker & van der Leun 2017), analyzing how the Scandinavian border and coast guards negotiate the securitized context which they work in. It also makes a theoretical contribution to securitization theory by conceptualizing securitization as a continuum, where it shifts between an explicit and implicit form (see Léonard and

Kaunert 2020). By doing so, it bridges the divide between the Copenhagen and the Paris school of security studies, opening for analysis of securitization's fluid form, as well as how it occurs through both discourses and practices.

This conceptualization draws inspiration from Billig's (1995) understanding of nationalism as having both "hot" and "banal" variants, with the latter often being ignored by Western scholars on behalf of the former, which tends to be attributed to non-Western societies. Introducing the notion of *banal securitization*, the paper examines how the Scandinavian border and coast guards banally securitize migration through their day-to-day work, as well as how they fail to recognize this because of their focus on the explicitly criminalizing practices of the Greek and Italian coast guards, which they position themselves against by invoking a sense of Nordic exceptionalism. The term banal does not suggest that there is anything trivial about the securitization of migration, especially not for refugees and migrants, but is rather an attempt to direct attention towards routinized and everyday ways in which this occurs. As Billig (1995: 7) points out, despite the "reassuring normality" of banal nationalism, it is not "benign", serving as readily for mobilization during times of crisis as its more extreme version (see Arendt's 1965/2006 "banality of evil").

Nordic exceptionalism, on the other hand, is an emic term used to describe the interviewees' view of themselves as being more professional and ethical than their non-Nordic colleagues, which for them is rooted in their background coming from countries where these values are ostensibly held in higher regard (see Aas & Gundhus 2015; Bevelander & Hellström 2019; Björling 2022; Emilsson 2018). While used in criminology to refer to the Nordic countries' comparatively less punitive penal systems (Crewe et al. 2023; Pratt & Eriksson 2014), this paper understands Nordic exceptionalism as a rationalizing strategy for the interviewees to make sense of their participation in what they see as problematic operations coordinated by Frontex. The analysis investigates how Nordic exceptionalism serves as a coping mechanism for the interviewees, which allows them to justify their continued participation in Frontex operations to themselves by differentiating themselves from their Southern, Central, and Eastern European peers, whom they believe subject refugees and migrants to harmful and illegal practices (see Borrelli 2018 for ignorance as a coping mechanism among police and migration officers). The feeling of some sense of Nordic exceptionalism thus becomes a way for them to resolve the moral dilemmas arising from their work (see Ekstedt 2023 for how European Asylum Agency caseworkers deal with working in a normatively complex field).

The paper hence mobilizes a critical constructivist approach, drawing attention to the seemingly trivial and unremarkable (Billig 1995; Kristensen 2019) in EU border control, which still has devastating consequences for the people trying to cross increasingly inaccessible borders.

METHOD

The paper draws on six semi-structured interviews (conducted between 2020–21) with Swedish and Danish border and coast guards and one informal conversation with a Nordic Frontex Management Board member. The interviews include one Danish police officer with a background in the navy, one Swedish document expert from Swedish border police (*Gränspolisens region syd*), and four Swedish coast guards (*Kustbevakningen*). The focus on seconded officers was a result of difficulty of

getting access to Frontex's standing corps members through Frontex's press office, which processes interview requests. The Danish police officer was referred to me through snowballing, whereas the Swedish border and coast guards were found on their respective websites and contacted by email. The interviewees have all been seconded to different Frontex operations between 2015–20, including Triton in the Central Mediterranean, Poseidon in the Aegean Sea, as well as in Hungary and Albania (see appendix for list of interviews). All but one had extensive experience in their role before their secondments, and all had been on multiple operations.

The interviewees were informed that they could talk freely about their work and how they experienced being part of Frontex operations. Concrete questions related to their everyday work and challenging aspects of it. It was expected that the interviewees would be sympathetic to the security discourse surrounding irregularized migration due to the nature of their work, but I was nevertheless interested in seeing how it was discursively maneuvered by them and how they dealt with moral qualms about their work (see [Bigo 2014](#) for a similar study; or [Ekstedt 2023](#) for “trained indifference” among asylum caseworkers). The interviews were coded thematically in order to discern overarching themes, where both banal securitization and Nordic exceptionalism stood out. The interviews were thus analyzed abductively, where I brought an “open” rather than an “empty” mind to them ([Atkinson 2015: 58](#)). I focused not only on what the interviewees' said but also how they said it ([Gubrium & Holstein 2001](#)), treating their accounts as discursive performances that need to be analyzed at a critical distance ([Hammersley 2014](#)).

The interviewees were informed about the aims of the research, that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw their consent at any time without giving a reason, that they would be pseudonymized, and that their personal data would be handled in accordance with the GDPR and Malmö university's guidelines on data protection. The interviews lasted around an hour and were carried out in English or one of the Scandinavian languages. They were recorded and transcribed in verbatim, with the recordings being deleted afterwards. The contact list was stored on an encrypted USB in a locker that only I had access to. No personal information except for this was stored and no sensitive information was gathered from the participants. The project was vetted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (*Etikprövningsmyndigheten*, ref. no. 2019-05730), which means that it is found to meet the requirements of Swedish law regarding research with human subjects ([Regeringskansliet 2003](#)).

NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM AS A RATIONALIZING STRATEGY

This section analyses how the Scandinavian border and coast guards defend their participation in Frontex operations by drawing on the notion of Nordic exceptionalism. It explores how their perception of being more professional and ethical than their colleagues from Southern, Central, and Eastern European member states allows them to simultaneously distance themselves from what they consider to be questionable practices while advocating for their continued participation in these operations. The analysis shows how Nordic exceptionalism enables the Scandinavian border and coast guards to discursively resist explicitly criminalizing practices, while numbing them to their own banal securitization of migration ([Bigo 2002](#); [Billig 1995](#)). The following illustrates that Nordic exceptionalism, as a rationalizing strategy, allows these frontline workers to navigate restrictive EU border control policies by voicing

opposition to them while at the same time complying with their implementation on the ground (see [Lipsky 2010](#) for discretion in street-level bureaucracies). Nordic exceptionalism thus becomes a way for them to resolve the ethical dilemmas pertaining to their work (see [Vandevoordt 2018](#) for the “emotional labor” involved in dealing with conflicting rationales).

The above is illustrated by the Swedish coast guards’ emphasis on the importance of fundamental rights in their operations and that this was one of their main contributions to Frontex operations, in addition to saving lives (see also [Aas & Gundhus 2015](#)).¹ When asked whether he considered that their operations in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas had been successful, one of the interviewees emphasized that “I feel that every time we go down and help – no matter which Nordic country does it – we make a very big difference” (interview 8/3/21). He elaborated why this was the case:

I think the Swedish authorities probably agree with... how it should work, human rights. We know what it should look like. If I see or hear or think something like that, the police and NOA [the Swedish Police’s National Operations Department] know that we are on it right away. We... Nordic countries... have high morals and a strong work ethic and we have a good mindset when it comes to human rights. (interview 8/3/21)

Here we see how the Nordic member states’ contribution to Frontex operations is framed as positive due to their stronger morals and work ethic compared to both Frontex and other member states, whom the interviewees imply should learn from them. The quote illustrates how the Swedish coast guard sees itself as a human rights watchdog in Frontex operations, which resolves any concerns the interviewees might have had with participating in them (see [Vandevoordt 2018](#) for how dilemmas (dis) appear for frontline workers). Nordic exceptionalism was also evident in one of the interviewees’ motivations for participating in Frontex operations, which was “to make a difference” (interview 4/3/20). While innocuous, this adds a new dimension to the “victim-savior logic” that characterizes EU border control ([Pallister-Wilkins 2015b](#)), where the Scandinavian border and coast guards save refugees and migrants not only from unscrupulous smugglers but the Greek and Italian coast guard as well.

The interviewees noted several incidents of what they considered to be malpractice by the host member state’s coast guard, which in their eyes put refugees and migrants even more at risk. One example was the Greek coast guard’s practice of transferring refugees and migrants from their own boat to the coast guard vessel instead of escorting them to shore, which the Swedish coast guards described as dangerous because of high waves on the open sea and the risk that the migrant boat capsizes and people drown, especially when the transfers take place in the dark (interviews 4/3/20, 2/3/21). They described one such case which led to the coast guard vessel colliding with the migrant vessel.² The Swedish coast guards’ feelings of professional superiority thus rationalize their participation in Frontex operations, since they believe that they can change them for the better.

The sentiment of Nordic exceptionalism is also apparent in the interviewees’ emphasis on communication issues with the host state (Italy, Greece, Albania, and Hungary),

¹ Catching smugglers was also mentioned as important, but was subsidiary to these goals.

² A similar incident happened in June 2023, when the Greek coast guard attempted to tow an overcrowded migrant boat which ended up capsizing. Almost all onboard, a total of 600, drowned as a result (see [Dovey-Attlee et al. 2023](#)).

with one of the Swedish coast guards underlining that it was easier to cooperate with other Nordic countries, explaining how the Icelanders briefed them before they went to the Mediterranean in 2015 and how the Finns helped them check the boats before patrol (interview 8/3/21). He added that it “also works well with the Portuguese” and other nationalities, but the preference was for Nordics who shared their mindset and working methods. The Swedish coast guards’ sense of superior ways of working is evident in the quote below, with the interviewee boasting that their standard operating procedures (SOPs) for search and rescue (SAR) had become adopted by Frontex:

Then we had set up... SOPs, standard operating procedures for how we do sea rescues, to prevent further accidents from happening... we often filmed when conducting sea rescues so everyone could see how it is done, both for training and to see that it is done properly. It was fun because our SOPs from Sweden were implemented by Frontex, so now all countries use our SOPs... First, when we approach a vessel in distress at sea we always come with two boats – if you come with one boat then everyone will jump over on that side and then the boat overturns – and then we handed out life jackets to prevent anything from happening, we always went to the back and got over one of our officials to the boats. We are just very calm, we don’t scream and shout... so I think the migrants perceived it as if they were safe. (interview 17/3/21)

Here we see the EU-wide diffusion of Nordic exceptionalism in the form of the Swedish coast guard’s SOPs, which includes not only a supposedly superior practical logic (i.e. preventing the boats from overturning) but also a superior attitude (that is, remaining “calm”), which makes refugees and migrants feel “safer” than if they were rescued by someone else. This portrayal of their own SAR operations, by contrast, implies that the response of other member states’ coast guards is chaotic and characterized by boats overturning (the Italian coast guard was implicitly linked to these descriptions). In the Swedish coast guards’ view, order meets disorder here, with them patiently reinstating control in this disorderly situation at sea, acting as the voice of reason in EU border control. By drawing on the notion of Nordic exceptionalism, the Scandinavian border and coast guards are thus able to *both* criticize problematic aspects of Frontex operations while at the same time insulate themselves from critique by civil society actors by arguing that they help improve the overall standards of the operations, which saves lives (see also [Pallister-Wilkins 2015a](#)).

Nordic exceptionalism hence provides them with a moral alibi for participating in these operations (see [Borrelli & Lindberg 2018](#) for the “moral balancing acts” of migration and border officials). This is further demonstrated by one of the Swedish coast guard’s concern that Frontex’s standing corps will be mostly composed of officers from Eastern European member states because of the low pay grade, which he fears will lead to lower standards in the operations:³

I’ll tell you what I see as the biggest problem... I’m not alone in seeing it, but there are not many who talk about it, that when you recruit staff who will work for Frontex with the current conditions, then it will exclude the Western part of Europe, they are not going to be interested. What is left is

³ This was echoed by the Nordic Frontex Management Board representative (informal conversation 5/2/21).

the Eastern part of Europe, and they have – if you compare – a significantly more restrictive view on migrants. And it's going to have an effect – it's going to take a few years... if you do not do something adequate, the development will be like this... And it is first of all these who are intervening officials, border guards, those who work in the boats and on the border and such, they are the ones who will become Eastern Europeans. But then at the managerial level there will be more interest from Western Europe. (interview 2/3/21)

Nordic exceptionalism is in this context linked to the whole of Western Europe, which is seen as having more liberal attitudes towards refugees and migrants, presumably translating into how these border and coast guards treat them during operations. Apart from being generalizing and stigmatizing, the quote illustrates the usefulness of Nordic exceptionalism as a frame in which to understand how the Scandinavian border and coast guards rationalize their work in the ethically charged field of EU border control, going to great lengths to separate themselves from Frontex and other member states' dubious practices. They therefore discursively resist the criminalization and attendant de-humanization of migration while at the same time being complicit in its banal securitization through their daily work and continued participation in Frontex operations (see [Bigo 2002](#) and [Billig 1995](#) for the banal reproduction of securitizing practices and nationalism, respectively).⁴

The intricate link between resistance and complicity is further evident in the Swedish coast guards' reflections on the serious incident report (SIR) they lodged during Operation Poseidon Sea in 2020, which was part of the mediatized pushback allegations against Frontex that culminated in the resignation of the Executive Director two years later ([Barigazzi & Lynch 2022](#); [Waters, Freudenthal & Williams 2020](#)):

Sweden as a country and the coast guard and the police take this very seriously. We thought we saw an error and we reported that error according to Frontex's guidelines. And it was not that we were looking... to accuse the Greeks or anything... we just wrote a SIR report... and Sweden and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the police stand by what we have written. We... did not think that Frontex handled it properly according to their own statutes and laws ... [W]e know what the law is and we follow it, and we even follow Frontex's instructions and their rules how to proceed when something like that happens. And then it's... probably the Commission that will decide whether Frontex has handled it right or wrong. We have handled it right as a nation and we cannot do more... we have done what we were supposed to, and then it's up to other countries to do what they are supposed to. (interview 8/3/21)

This quote shows how Nordic exceptionalism facilitates blame shifting and responsibility evasion for the negative consequences of their work, with the interviewee contending that after reporting an incidence of suspected pushbacks Sweden has done its job and that it is then up to others to "do what they are supposed to" (see [Wærp 2024](#) for a similar tendency among Frontex and DG Home

⁴ The sentiment of a wider form of Western European exceptionalism can also be seen in Frontex's former Executive Director's justifications for the agency's continued presence in Greece, Croatia, and Hungary despite widespread allegations of fundamental rights violations by national border authorities: in order to raise the overall standards ([European Parliament 2021a](#); see also [Parusel 2022](#)).

officials). This exemplifies how by focusing on clear-cut cases of criminalization of migration, the Scandinavian border and coast guards fail to see their own less noticeable role in its securitization (à la the Paris school), which is no less harmful. Responsibility evasion is also evident in the quote by another Swedish coast guard, who refused any responsibility for what happens to refugees and migrants outside of their immediate care:

I read in the media about these 'pushbacks'... that is nothing the Swedish coast guard- we took care of human rights and that everyone had the right to seek asylum... we made no attempt to push anyone back, we saw to it that they were rescued, and as I said, everyone wants to seek asylum, so the Italian authorities had to take care of that. (interview 17/3/21)

The above again demonstrates the Swedish coast guard's discursive resistance towards criminalization, being critical of the reported pushbacks taking place in the Mediterranean. In contrast, the interviewee draws on a humanitarian discourse in rationalizing his work, which for him was to rescue people at sea and respect their fundamental rights (see also DeBono 2019). The security framing of migration remains unquestioned, however, with the quote also indicating the limited scope of Nordic exceptionalism, with the Swedish coast guards considering their job to be done after disembarkation, with whatever happens to people next being member states' responsibility (see Pallister-Wilkins 2015b). The following further illustrates this:

We who are at sea cannot do much more than what we do, we can save lives and take them ashore, then we cannot do anything more... We are there in the boats, then there's all the other authorities who take over... it is their immigration system and investigations and everything, it is their responsibility. (interview 8/3/21)

The limits of Nordic exceptionalism are also evident in the quote by the Danish police officer, who described pullbacks as the "best" way to save lives at sea:

The *best thing* was to see them on the... Turkish side, call... the Turks, to intercept them. That was the *best solution*... But if the migrants crossed this line on the map- that nobody could see on the water- then you would not accept the Turks to cross it... And then two minutes before you were calling on the radio 'more to the left... no, no, there, there!', but it crossed the line two minutes later, so 'stay away, now it's ours'. (interview 4/3/2020, emphases in original)

This shows that securitization is not absent in the Scandinavian border and coast guards' accounts of their work, but that it features in a less remarkable way than is the case for traditional accounts of securitization theory (see Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998; cf. Bigo 2002). This form of banal securitization is also present in the quote by one of the Swedish coast guards, who emphasized the complementarity of border patrol and search and rescue:

It goes a little hand in hand... much of this border patrol became sea rescue. And because it is border patrol, you have to guide the migrants safely – everyone has the right to apply for asylum – so you have to take them to a country where they have the opportunity to apply for asylum, a safe haven... [I]n 2015 there was a lot of sea rescue, we had the police with us and we had health personnel... But... it was often the case that we

came to the area where Frontex wanted border patrol and it immediately turned into sea rescue. (interview 17/3/21)

Although this interviewee discursively resists the criminalization of migration by emphasizing the right to asylum, the “care and control duality” (Pallister-Wilkins 2015b) is still present in the operations, which have both police and health care personnel onboard, with the refugees and migrants being perceived as a potential risk to the crew and Europe at large while also being at risk of dehydration or hypothermia (see Aradau 2004). Nordic exceptionalism here justifies the Swedish coast guard’s participation in Frontex operations since it provides them leeway in how they implement EU border controls, trying to uphold humanitarian values in a security-dominated field, while simultaneously obscuring their banal securitization of migration.

Nordic exceptionalism also came to the fore in the border and coast guards’ descriptions of culture differences in Frontex operations and how this complicated their work (see Aas & Gundhus 2015 for similar experiences among Norwegian border guards). This is clear in the quote by a female Swedish border police about her experience of gender inequality during deployments:

[T]here are challenges with going on operations (sighs)... EU cultural differences and it is a bit... messy and... there is a predominance of men... And then it is mostly- there are many Eastern states and... you notice that there is a cultural difference compared to how it is at home – that is, in Sweden – to be a woman and to work for example in Greece and Hungary... And it was probably something that I was not fully prepared for before I left... but it is noticeable that their attitude is a little bit different... It is how it is and it is not always very fun, but it is something that... I have written in my reports after the Frontex assignments as well, partly that I think it’s a shame that there are so few women who go, maybe not from Sweden but from other countries, and that there may be a bit of macho culture sometimes. (interview 8/2/21)

Participating in Frontex operations was seen as rewarding but also challenging for the Scandinavian border and coast guards, who found the context that they were working in very different from what they were used to at home. To them, these ways of doing things were also inferior to their own (described as “messy” or “macho” above), which the Swedish border police’s description of the Hungarian border guards’ work ethic illustrates:

It is clear that there are great differences between the different countries. Hungary was probably the country that was the most difficult, but... if you look at the flows, how much traffic they have across the border, Serbia-Hungary... I do not think we can fully imagine what it is like even if we stand at Hyllie... it is not possible to compare with the flows they have... There is an irritation against Hungary... we know that they are sloppy with border control... with [passport] stamping. And it’s easy to sit here and be frustrated, but when you are there and see how much they have to do – you get a different perspective, which is very useful. But the Hungarians were very difficult to work with... Partly linguistically, it was barely possible to communicate with them... And it was a bit like when you discovered cases of stolen goods, etc., they did not want those cases. They let quite

a bit go. And there was also a frustration, ‘why am I here, why should I work on finding these cases, when it does not lead to anything?’ (interview 8/2/21)

While acknowledging the Hungarian border guards’ heavy workload, the interviewee is frustrated that they do not do their job ‘properly’ or cooperate with seconded Frontex officers in solving detected cases. This shows that Nordic exceptionalism serves as a benchmark for the Scandinavian border and coast guards, for which they compare non-Nordic member states’ operational practices to the standards and methods that they are used to from their home countries. This is further illustrated by the Swedish border police’s admittance that in the beginning she struggled to accept the fact that they were not there to monitor the Hungarian police but to *help* them (interview 8/2/21). The Swedish coast guards described similar experiences in Greece and Italy, listing bureaucracy, politics, and doubtful ethics as obstacles to doing their work:

If I may allow myself to be a little critical of how the operations are carried out, I think that one is completely left to the host country. In this case Greece is the host country, and no matter what they say, we must follow it, because it is their main responsibility. But it also means that it becomes difficult at times... purely morally and ethically... to follow their recommendations, and I know of a number of incidents... that you do not carry out according to normal seafaring standards, you expose the migrants to greater risks than you need ... Of course one must understand that Greece and Italy... have had very, very much for a long time and there is fatigue and it is a policy too, the right-wing parties are growing... But... what I experience is that in various ways one sometimes tries to make it difficult or even prevent the possibility of seeking asylum. And I have had... a lot of dialogues over the years with NGOs... and they point out different things, and there is evidence I believe. (interview 2/3/21)

This quote illustrates explicit discursive resistance among the Swedish coast guards towards the criminalization of migration in EU border control, while at the same time demonstrating their complicity in practice by following the Greeks’ ‘unethical’ recommendations. As such, it is a less overt form of securitization which is more easily overlooked than the pushbacks by the Greek and Italian coast guards (see [Bigo 2002](#); [Billig 1995](#)), although it lends legitimacy to these. Nordic exceptionalism facilitates this simultaneous form of resistance/complicity, with the interviewee trying to come to terms with these operational practices which deviate from what he considers to be “normal seafaring standards”. Whereas firemen start fires rather than put them out in Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, in this operational environment coast guards put peoples’ lives at further risk rather than save them. Understanding their role as saving lives at sea and ensuring access to asylum, the Swedish coast guard’s role is hence inverted in Frontex operations.

This is also illustrated in their assessment of Frontex’s (mis)handling of their serious incidence report of a suspected pushback, initially trying to dissuade them from filing the report and later restricting the public’s access to it. This prompted several of the Swedish coast guards to reconsider their participation in future Frontex operations:

I have talked to a number of officials who were on the way down but were unsure whether they would participate in the operation under these conditions, when human rights are not safeguarded. Then I don’t know

exactly how they reasoned... but previously it has been said that the best way to influence positively is that we participate, do a good job, and are the eyes on the ground. (interview 2/3/21)

Although being critical of the lack of human rights safeguards in Frontex operations, we see here how the belief in Nordic exceptionalism allows the Swedish coast guards to legitimize their continued participation in these in order to diffuse their best practices to Frontex and non-Western European member states, who are seen as being in need of them. Instead of withdrawing, their possibility to “have eyes on the ground” become a reason for them to enhance the operations from within. When asked about lessons learned from the 2015 ‘migration crisis’, one of the Swedish coast guards emphasized that “both Frontex and those we worked with got to see a bit how we work and I hope they appreciated that way” (interview 17/3/21). Similarly, his colleague singled out Nordic countries’ “perspective on humanity” as their main contribution to Frontex operations:

We were down there with the Icelanders... in 2015 for two weeks... and they have the same perspective on humanity as we have and we are much more humane and follow the rules in a different way, I would say. We respect human rights to the letter, but at the same time I understand the Italians when there are so many arrivals... So the humane part I imagine is... the biggest impact we may have had. (interview 15/3/21)

Being humane and rule-oriented are here explicated as essential features of Nordic exceptionalism, which is seen as positive for Frontex operations, which lack these qualities. As this section has shown, Nordic exceptionalism does two things: 1) it rationalizes the Scandinavian border and coast guards’ participation in Frontex operations since it is for refugees and migrants’ own good, and 2) it enables the more banal securitization of migration through their everyday routine practices. By introducing the notion of banal securitization, the preceding has demonstrated how the Scandinavian border and coast guards resist the criminalization of migration while they reproduce banal securitization: the former discursively and the latter in practice. Nordic exceptionalism allows them to distance themselves from what they see as sub-standard or straightforward illegal practices, and at the same time to call for their continued participation in Frontex operations by claiming that it is beneficial for not only refugees and migrants but Frontex and other member states as well. This, in turn, enables the Scandinavian border and coast guards to shift both blame and responsibility for fundamental rights violations committed during these operations, with the result that securitization becomes increasingly normalized in EU border control (see [Waerp 2024](#)). Nordic exceptionalism thus facilitates the *normalization* of banal securitization in this field.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how Scandinavian border and coast guards rationalize their participation in Frontex operations. By drawing on interviews with Swedish and Danish officers seconded to Frontex operations, it explored their accounts through the prism of Nordic exceptionalism: their belief that Nordic border and coast guards have a higher moral standing and are more professional than non-Nordic ones. Being inspired by securitization theory ([Bigo 2002](#); [Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998](#)) and Billig’s (1995) banal nationalism, the paper advanced the notion of banal securitization, which draws attention to the less noteworthy but nonetheless ubiquitous ways in

which migration is securitized through routine everyday practices. Understanding securitization as a scale which ranges from banal to explicit, the paper argued that by focusing on the overtly criminalizing practices of the Greek and Italian coast guards, the Scandinavian border and coast guards failed to recognize what is hidden in plain sight: their own banal securitization. Nordic exceptionalism thus serves a dual function: 1) it justifies the Scandinavian border and coast guards' participation in Frontex operations since it is for refugees and migrants' best interest, and 2) it furthers the banal securitization of migration in EU border control, with the result that securitization becomes increasingly normalized.

As such, the paper makes a theoretical contribution to securitization theory, widening the concept of securitization to include both banal and explicit forms as well as discourses and practices (see [Bigo 2002](#); [Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998](#)). It also contributes empirically to literatures on the securitization and criminalization of migration, focusing on the role of Scandinavian border and coast guards as a relevant audience of Frontex's securitization and how the guards negotiate this in the execution of their everyday tasks. The paper elucidated how the interviewees resisted criminalization discursively but nevertheless became complicit in reproducing securitization in practice, both of which were enabled by their belief in Nordic exceptionalism. How border and coast guards understand their role in the morally fraught field of border control is an important avenue for future research, especially considering that Frontex – the largest EU agency – is operating further away from the external borders and is set to have its own standing corps of 10,000 border guards by 2027.

APPENDIX

List of Interviews

- Danish police officer, seconded to Frontex operation Poseidon Sea (Kos), 2019. March 4, 2020.
- Document expert, Swedish border police. Seconded to Frontex operations in Hungary (2017), Lesvos (2019), and Albania. February 8, 2021.
- Swedish coast guard, seconded to Frontex operations Triton and Poseidon sea (Chios, Lesvos, Athens), 2015–20. March 2, 2021.
- Swedish coast guard, seconded to multiple Frontex operations since 2007 (Operation Poseidon in Athens, Lesvos, Chios). March 8, 2021.
- Swedish coast guard, seconded to Frontex operations Triton and Poseidon (Lesvos), 2015–17. March 15, 2021.
- Swedish coast guard, seconded to Frontex operation Triton (2015–17). March 17, 2021.
- Nordic Frontex Management Board representative (informal conversation). February 5, 2021.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the editors and anonymous peer reviewers for their feedback on this article.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Elaine Waerp  orcid.org/0000-0002-2426-257X

Friedrich-Alexander-University (FAU) Center for Human Rights Erlangen-Nuremberg (CHREN), Germany

Waerp
Nordic Journal of
Migration Research
DOI: 10.33134/njmr.855

14

REFERENCES

- Aas, K.F. and Bosworth, M. (eds). 2013. *The borders of punishment: Migration, citizenship, and social exclusion*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199669394.001.0001>
- Aas, K.F. and Gundhus, H.O. 2015. 'Policing humanitarian borderlands: Frontex, human rights and the precariousness of life', *British Journal of Criminology*, 55(1), pp. 1–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu086>
- Aradau, C. 2004. 'The perverse politics of four-letter words: Risk and pity in the securitization of human trafficking', *Millennium*, 33(2), pp. 251–277. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298040330020101>
- Arendt, H. 1965/2006. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. London: Penguin Books.
- Atkinson, P. 2015. *For ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Balzacq, T. 2005. 'The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11(2), pp. 171–201. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052960>
- Barigazzi, J. and Lynch, S. 2022. 'EU border agency chief resigns after critical watchdog probe', *Politico*, 29 April. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-border-agency-fabrice-leggeri-resigns-watchdog-probe-findings-released-misconduct/> [Last accessed 7 March 2024].
- Bevelander, P. and Hellström, A. 2019. 'Pro-and anti-migrant mobilizations in polarized Sweden', in A. Rea et al. (eds.). *The Refugee reception crisis in Europe. Polarized opinions and mobilizations*. Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles. pp. 75–94.
- Bigo, D. 2002. 'Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease', *Alternatives*, 27(1), pp. 63–92. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540202705105>
- Bigo, D. 2014. 'The (in)securitization practices of the three universes of EU border control: Military/navy-border guards/police-database analysts', *Security Dialogue*, 45(3), pp. 209–225. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614530459>
- Bigo, D., Bonditti, P. and Olsson, C. 2016. 'Mapping the European field of security Professionals', in D. Bigo et al. (eds.). *Europe's 21st Century Challenge. Delivering Liberty*. London: Routledge. pp. 49–63. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315581095-12>
- Billig, M. 1995. *Banal nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Björling, E. 2022. *Heroes, villains & victims—A critical discourse analysis of the Swedish news media's representation of Frontex*. Unpublished thesis (bachelor), Malmö university.
- Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN). 2020. 'The black book of pushbacks', in H. Barker and M. Zajovic (eds), *Commissioned by GUE/NGL*. vol. 1. Brussels: European Parliamentary Group.
- Borrelli, L.M. 2018. 'Using ignorance as (un)conscious bureaucratic strategy: Street-level practices and structural influences in the field of migration enforcement', *Qualitative Studies*, 5(2), pp. 95–109. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7146/qs.v5i2.104421>

- Borrelli, L.M.** 2022. 'Should (s)he stay or should (s)he go?–Street-level suspicion and the construction of the '(un) deserving migrant'', *Geopolitics*, 27(4), pp. 1093–1116. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1814257>
- Borrelli, L.M. and Lindberg, A.** 2018. 'The creativity of coping: Alternative tales of moral dilemmas among migration control officers', *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*, 4(3), pp. 163–178. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMS.2018.093876>
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O. and de Wilde, J.** 1998. *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781685853808>
- Campesi, G.** 2022. *Policing mobility regimes: Frontex and the production of the European borderscape*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429291548>
- Christides, G. and Lüdke, S.** 2022. Breaking laws at the borders: Why DER SPIEGEL is publishing the EU investigative report on pushbacks. *Der Spiegel*, 13 October. Available at: https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/why-der-spiegel-is-publishing-the-euinvestigative-report-on-pushbacks-a-5218398a-5c1e-414e-a477-b26515353fce?sara_ref=re-xx-cp-sh [Last accessed 8 March 2024].
- Christides, G., van Dijken, K., Lüdke, S. and Popp, M.** 2021. Missteps and mismanagement at Frontex: Scandals plunge Europe's border agency into turmoil. *Der Spiegel*, 5 February. Available at: https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/missteps-and-mismanagement-at-frontexscandals-plunge-europe-s-border-agency-into-turmoil-a-d11ae404-5fd4-41a7-b127eca47a00753f?sara_ref=re-xx-cp-sh [Last accessed 8 March 2024].
- Côté, A.** 2016. 'Agents without agency: Assessing the role of the audience in securitization theory', *Security Dialogue*, 47(6), pp. 541–558. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010616672150>
- Crewe, B., Ievins, A., Larmour, S., Laursen, J., Mjåland, K. and Schliehe, A.** 2023. 'Nordic penal exceptionalism: A comparative, empirical analysis', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 63(2), pp. 424–443. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azac013>
- Davey-Attlee, B., Labropoulou, E., Karadsheh, J., Mezzofiore, G. and Polglase, K.** 2023. If they had left us be, we wouldn't have drowned': CNN investigation raises questions about Greek coast guard's account of shipwreck tragedy. *CNN*, 23 June. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/23/europe/greece-migrant-boat-disaster-investigation-intlcmd/index.html> [Last accessed 7 March 2024].
- DeBono, D.** 2019. 'Narrating the humanitarian border: Moral deliberations of territorial borderworkers at the EU's Mediterranean border', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 28(1), pp. 55–73.
- Ekstedt, J.** 2023. 'Bureaucratic configuration and discretion in asylum case processing–The case of the EUAA in Greece', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 11(22), pp. 1–17. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-023-00345-0>
- Emilsson, H.** 2018. 'Continuity or change? The refugee crisis and the end of Swedish exceptionalism', *MIM Working Paper Series*, 18(3), pp. 1–24. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.24834/2043/25232>
- European Parliament.** 2021a. *LIBE working group on Frontex scrutiny*, 23 June. Available at: https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/webstreaming/event_20210623-1530-COMMITTEE-LIBE?start=210623133148&end=210623154116&audio=qa [Last accessed 8 March 2024].

- European Parliament.** 2021b. *Report on the fact-finding investigation on Frontex concerning alleged fundamental rights violations*, 14 July. LIBE committee. Rapporteur: Tineke Strik. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/238156/14072021%20Final%20Report%20FSWGen.pdf> [Last accessed 8 March 2024].
- Follis, K.** 2018. 'Border management in Europe: Europeanisation and its discontents', In: Weinar, A., Bonjour, S. and Zhynomirska, L. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Migration in Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 213–226. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315512853-21>
- Franko, K.** 2019. *The crimmigrant other: Migration and penal power*. London, UK: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351001441>
- Frontex.** 2021. *Fundamental rights and legal operational aspects of operations in the Aegean Sea. Final report of the Frontex Management Board working group*, 1 March. Available at: https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/MB_Documents/Agenda_Point_WGFRaLO_final_report.pdf [Last accessed 8 March 2024].
- Gubrium, J.F. and Holstein, J.A.** 2001. 'From the individual interview to the interview society', in J.F. Gubrium and J.A. Holstein (eds), *Handbook of Interview Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. pp. 2–32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412973588.n3>
- Hammersley, M.** 2014. 'On the ethics of interviewing for discourse analysis. *Qualitative Research*', 14(5), 529–541. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113495039>
- Horii, S.** 2016. 'The effect of Frontex's risk analysis on the European border controls', *European Politics and Society*, 17(2), 242–258. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1121002>
- Human Rights Watch.** 2011. *The EU's dirty hands. Frontex involvement in ill-treatment of migrant detainees in Greece*, September. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/greece0911webwcover_0.pdf [Last accessed 8 March 2024].
- Kristensen, M.P.** 2019. *Relocating Europe: Border officials and their everyday attempts to stabilize borders*. Unpublished thesis (PhD), Københavns Universitet.
- Léonard, S. and Kaunert, C.** 2020. 'The securitisation of migration in the European Union: Frontex and its evolving security practices', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(6), pp. 1417–1429. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851469>
- Lipsky, M.** 2010. *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public service*. 30th ed. New York: The Russell Sage Foundation.
- Moreno-Lax, V.** 2017. *Accessing asylum in Europe: Extraterritorial border controls and refugee rights under EU law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198701002.001.0001>
- Pallister-Wilkins, P.** 2015a. The humanitarian policing of 'our sea'. *Border Criminologies*, 20 April. Available at: <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2015/04/humanitarian> [Last accessed 8 March 2024].
- Pallister-Wilkins, P.** 2015b. The humanitarian politics of European border policing: Frontex and border police in Evros. *International Political Sociology*, 9(1), pp. 53–69. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12076>
- Parusel, B.** 2022. *Should they stay or should they go? Frontex's fundamental rights dilemma*. December 2022:22epa, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS).

- Paul, R.** 2017. 'Harmonisation by risk analysis? Frontex and the risk-based governance of European border control', *Journal of European Integration*, 39(6), pp. 689–706. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2017.1320553>
- Perkowski, N., Stierl, M. and BurrIDGE, A.** 2023. 'The evolution of European border governance through crisis: Frontex and the interplay of protracted and acute crisis narratives', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 41(1), pp. 110–129. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758231152478>
- Pratt, J. and Eriksson, A.** 2014. *Contrasts in punishment: An explanation of Anglophone excess and Nordic exceptionalism*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203096116>
- Regeringskansliet.** 2003. *Lag (2003:460) om etikprövning av forskning som avser människor (SFS nr: 2003:460)*. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.
- Shachar, A.** 2020. 'Lead essay', in A. Shachar (ed), *The Shifting Border: Legal Cartographies of Migration and Mobility*. Ayelet Shachar in Dialogue. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 1–96.
- van der Woude, M., Barker, V. and van der Leun, J.** 2017. 'Crimmigration in Europe', *European Journal of Criminology*, 14(1), pp. 3–6. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370816639814>
- Vandevoordt, R.** 2018. 'Judgement and ambivalence in migration work: On the (dis) appearance of dilemmas in assisting voluntary return', *Sociology*, 52(2), pp. 282–297. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516656318>
- Waerp, E.** 2024. *The age of Frontex: Banal securitization and its normalization in European external(ized) border control*. PhD thesis, Malmö university. Available at: <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-66709> [Last accessed 24 August 2024].
- Waters, N., Freudenthal, E. and Williams, L.** 2020. Frontex at fault: European border force complicit in 'illegal' pushbacks. *Bellingcat*, 23 October. Available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/10/23/frontex-at-fault-european-border-force-complicit-in-illegal-pushbacks/> [Last accessed 8 March 2024].

Waerp
*Nordic Journal of
 Migration Research*
 DOI: 10.33134/njmr.855

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Waerp, E. 2025. Nordic Exceptionalism? How Scandinavian Border and Coast Guards Rationalize Their Participation in Frontex Operations. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 15(3): 7, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.855>

Submitted: 10 March 2024

Accepted: 30 August 2024

Published: 22 January 2025

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.