Frontex and the University: Positivist Dissonance and the Institutionalisation of Border Violence through Research

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Frontex and the University: Positivist Dissonance and the Institutionalisation of Border Violence through Research

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Abstract: The paper examines the existing relationships between universities and Frontex, investigating and problematising the intersection between the higher education sector and the violence of the European border regime. We introduce the concept of *positivist dissonance* to conceptualise these relationships within the wider "industrial-military-academic complex". Several cases are examined, ranging from the Horizon projects involving both universities and Frontex to the research grants offered by the agency and its teaching programmes. We also discuss the case of our department at the Polytechnic of Turin, which has provided cartographic services to Frontex. The paper offers a twofold contribution. First, expanding on available scholarship, it shows how universities function as key actors in the enforcement of regimes of border control. Second, it provides conceptual and empirical insights to centre academia as a prime ground not only of critical thinking but also of direct struggle against the violence of the EU border regime.

Keywords: Frontex, academia, military-industrial-academic complex, positivist dissonance, EU border regime

Introduction

The story behind this paper began in July 2021, during a staff meeting on Zoom in our department, the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies

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and Planning (DIST) at the Polytechnic of Turin. Following several updates on research and teaching, the Head of Department (HoD) announced a newly signed "research" partnership with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex. In the institutional press release published that summer on the Polytechnic's website, the HoD presented the agreement as follows:

> [The] project fits perfectly into the strategic objective of the Department, to develop a laboratory capable of processing and managing spatial data even of great complexity. This objective is an essential element of the DIST Excellence project … which strengthens the interdisciplinary nature of research and the ability to create highly innovative products and services. (Poliflash 2021)

One of us, Michele, was present at that meeting and, along with a few colleagues, questioned whether it was appropriate for a university to collaborate with Frontex, a controversial European agency involved in pushing back asylum seekers and migrants at several EU frontiers and now under scrutiny at the EU Court of Justice. We will return to this issue, and to our department's involvement with Frontex, later in the paper. At this stage, however, it is important to situate what follows in our own political and intellectual lives as salaried academics working within the European higher education sector. This paper contributes to debates by investigating an often-overlooked intersection: that between the university sector and the violence of the European border regime. Through new and long-standing collaborations, funding streams, and teaching, universities are increasingly embroiled in this regime in ways that challenge and transform what it means to study and to offer space for critical thinking in the EU today. This entanglement is partly driven by the withdrawal of public research funding, which, underpinned by neoliberal ideology, pressures universities to seek partnerships with private enterprises. An increasing share of these enterprises belongs to the military sector. This neoliberal turn in academia has been an active topic in geography (Berg 2012; Davies et al. 2021) and beyond (Bhambra et al. 2018).

Here, however, our focus is on exploring how these neoliberal processes contribute to what Giroux (2007:32) terms a "biopolitics of disposability and exclusion", leading to the consolidation of the "military-industrial-academic complex", a phrase popularised by US Senator William Fulbright (Giroux 2007:15; see also Pinkerton et al. 2011). In future work, we plan to examine more closely how EU universities are embedded in the EU defence apparatus—an inquiry we are already pursuing in activist contexts (Lancione 2023). In this paper, we foreground Frontex because the agency is a constitutive part of this apparatus, albeit rarely recognised as such in academic literature, with a few exceptions (see below). By drawing on critical border studies, scholarship on the Black Mediterranean, and original research into the linkages between Frontex and the university, our contribution is twofold. First, we extend prior research by illustrating how universities function not only as integral components of the military-industrial complex but also as active agents in the enforcement of border control regimes. While some scholars have investigated how universities are entangled with border regimes (see Cassidy and Davidson 2024), we critically analyse the political and discursive

facets of this entanglement, with particular attention to how Frontex penetrates the economies of research funding and teaching. Second, we seek to position academia as a critical site not only for thought but also for direct struggle against the violence of the EU border regime. Focusing on the case of our primary employer over the past year is, in this sense, a deliberate act of praxis.

Our analysis builds on a rich body of scholarship on the workings of the EU border regime (Andersson 2014; Schindel 2022; Tazzioli 2018a, 2018b; Van Houtum and Pijpers 2007; Vradis et al. 2019). Several authors have highlighted how non-governmental institutions contribute to border surveillance and control and how, by invoking humanitarian emergency, they shift attention away from border violence towards the tragedy of deaths at sea (Danewid 2017; Franko 2021; Kox and Staring 2022; Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017; Stierl 2018; Walters 2011). In these accounts, humanitarianism and securitisation form part of the same spiralling continuum (Župarić-Iljić and Valenta 2019). This "veiled humanitarianism" (Vaughan-Williams 2015) serves the EU's xenophobic geopolitics and the spectacularisation of the border (De Genova 2002, 2013), which is manifested beyond the militarised border in a pornography of pain and tragedy in depictions of people on the move. Alongside this "humanitarian borderwork" (Rumford 2006; see also Pallister-Wilkins 2022), we contend that the institutionalisation of border control, with its attendant violence, has been transferred into the sphere of academic institutions. This process is neither inevitable nor incidental but the result of deliberately constructed infrastructures of research funding and teaching, rooted in a shared cultural substratum that conflates the supposedly technical act of producing scientific knowledge with the supposedly technical act of policing a border.

The accepted (and celebrated) partnerships between universities, Frontex, and many military industries more broadly are enabled by what we might call a *positivist dissonance*. "Positivist", because much of the "science" produced in Europe today, despite decades of cultural, feminist, and ontological turns, remains grounded in a colonially inflected pursuit of universal truth, generalisable principles, and applicable results. "Dissonance", because the behavioural and affective posture of mainstream academia—at least in Italy—assumes a detachment from its object of study and, crucially, from what that object of study transfers to the world. It is as if two parallel realities exist: one produced in "the lab" or articulated in the "critical paper" and another enacted through, or in relation to, those same sites of knowledge production. *Positivist dissonance* is a result of the positioning of academics and their institutions vis-à-vis the "military-industrial-academic complex" in which they are implicated. We argue that such positioning, in Italy and across Europe, emerges at the intersection of three aspects:

> [i] The positivist cultural underpinnings of the role scientists are expected to perform in society—namely, the belief that research must yield tangible "solutions" to tangible "problems". This ethos is particularly evident in a polytechnic university such as ours but is widespread across the sector; the emphasis on "impact" in the anglophone world is symptomatic of the same logic;

[ii] The unexamined dissonance of the academic self—by which we mean the affective and largely unspoken processes that allow research conducted within educational institutions to be seen as separate and independent, thus absolving it of responsibility for the violent operationalisation of its outcomes;

[iii] The rarely interrogated racist and colonial underpinnings of both. Drawing on the language of Erin McElroy and Alex Werth (2019), neither the "deracinated" foundations of academic productivity nor the subject performing that labour are ever compelled to reckon with the racial and colonial regimes of power in which they are embedded and to which they contribute.

Such positivist dissonance is embedded in the everyday life of the contemporary university in Europe and, more broadly, across the West. It is sustained by the neoliberal political economy of education, in which individuals and institutions are not only encouraged but often required to participate in and extract value from the biopolitical management of society (as recently discussed by Baldwin 2021; Wind 2024; see also Schiffrin 1997). In what follows, we investigate the positivist dissonance driving the partnerships between Frontex and academia by analysing the cultural, societal (in the sense of relational), and economic dimensions through which these collaborations are enacted. This framework proves relevant in the case of Frontex: through these three dimensions, academics simultaneously associate themselves with the agency (via the positivist pursuit of research) and disassociate from it (affectively and behaviourally) by distancing themselves from the political and social consequences of their work for the agency.

Culturally, the positivist assurance of technical knowledge provides a powerful form of legitimisation. This dynamic operates in two directions: agencies seek cultural validation by collaborating with the quintessential bearers of epistemic authority (universities), while universities pursue the direct translation of their knowledge production into what are promoted as "highly innovative products and services" (as our HoD put it). Socially, the very act of bringing people together (researchers, administrators, and university leaders with their counterparts in the agency) serves to reinforce and reproduce, in practice, the authority of this cultural dogma. Maps are drawn, devices engineered, and new inter-institutional research and funding networks established. Concrete interventions are launched to "solve" or address what has been defined as a pressing "problem". Economically, such partnerships activate a political economy of patents, contracts, tenders, and jobs (both academic and non-academic). Within this framework, even a modest agreement signed by a single professor in one department is interwoven with the broader expansion of EU border security funding. This dimension becomes especially important at a time when universities, historically underfunded (as in Italy), face further cuts amid the wider trend of EU militarisation. What binds these dynamics is not only their shared positivist foundation but also the fact that, at each step in the process, academics *dissociate* from the broader implications of the relations in which they are enmeshed. Thus, the cultural legitimisation of Frontex (and of the military-industrial complex more broadly) is left unexamined; the cumulative effects of prioritising end-use and

dual-use projects are not investigated; and the university's mission is steadily eroded in the name of ostensibly advantageous economic returns.

In what follows, we first situate Frontex within the fortressed European context from which it emerged. After a methodological section explaining our process, we examine three broad forms of partnerships between higher education institutions and the agency. We start with those labelled as "research", where inverted commas highlight that the term is often stretched to include commercial contracts with little intellectual or critical substance. Second, we offer a brief reflection on forms of "teaching" collaboration. Third, we turn to an in-depth analysis of our own institution to examine the specific partnerships developed with Frontex through EU public tendering. In the last section, we consider the long-term consequences of EU universities' involvement with Frontex, arguing that confronting the nexus between the agency and academia offers not only a way to resist complicity in the EU border regime industry but also an opportunity to challenge the positivist dissonance embedded in our intellectual labour.

Frontex and the European Border Regime

Frontex was established in 2004 by Council Regulation (EC) No. 2007/2004 as the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. Although it was initially tasked with coordinating external border management, the agency's mandate and influence expanded rapidly in subsequent years. The 2015 "refugee crisis" marked a turning point. That year, Operation Sophia was launched to "disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Mediterranean [and] contribute to reducing the further loss of lives at sea" (EUNAVFOR MED 2015:1). It was the agency's first operation to embody a new and precisely tailored military-humanitarian approach to migration management, and it inaugurated Frontex's militaristic deployment of forces for European border control (Akkerman 2016; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018).

In October 2015, the European Council announced plans to enhance Frontex's authority over repatriation operations. The following year, under Regulation (EU) 2016/1624, the agency was reconstituted as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG), with an expanded mandate and greater autonomy. This expansion of duties and responsibilities was accompanied by a dramatic budget increase thanks to the European Commission: from €6 million in 2005 to €754 million in 2022, with projections of €5 billion by 2027, alongside the deployment of 10,000 border guards (Facchini and Rondi 2022).

Frontex's trajectory must be considered within the wider Europeanised context of intensified border control (Bigo 2014; Perkowski et al. 2023). The history of Europe has long been marked by a gradual process of fortressing (Akkerman 2018; Benedicto 2019). Since the 1985 Schengen Agreement, EU borders have been progressively fortified through the deployment of military forces and through the incremental construction of "fences of death" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). The militarisation is biopolitically oriented and rests on a "security continuum"

(Huysmans 2000) that took shape after 9/11 and has since been reinforced by the strategic construction of the "crimmigrant" other (Aas 2011:336; see also Aas and Bosworth 2013; Marin and Spena 2016; Spena 2019). Within this racialised logic of "stranger danger" (Ahmed 2000), migrants are criminalised, intercepted, and filtered through processes of illegalisation that materialise in violent push-backs, detention, and deportation (see, among others, Accardo and Galieni 2019; Avallone 2018; Di Meo 2022).

The racialisation of European space (Isakjee et al. 2020) produces borders that are selectively permeable—what Reid-Henry (2013:202) terms "incorporating geo-politics"—made of insurmountable barriers for racialised foreigners and non-existent frontiers for European citizens. To sustain this barricading, European borders have gradually been externalised, creating expansive borderlands in third countries (Del Sarto 2010; see also Nicolosi 2024; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022). These spaces, which the European Council deems "fundamental" for integrated border management, in practice function as buffer zones for the EU (e.g. Albania for Italy).

As sketched above, Frontex operates as the European Union's enforcer by simultaneously creating crisis narratives and seeking to halt migration flows. As Sachseder et al. (2022) note, Frontex's risk analysis reports are distorted to align with the agency's aims, corroborating the idea of a gendered and racialised "invasion" of Europe (Danewid 2024). The production of maps with menacing arrows depicting the mass arrival of migrants from specific sites marked as threats is particularly alarming as it shapes public opinion and legitimises violence at the borders (Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020). Moreover, as Savatic et al. (2025) demonstrate, Frontex publishes inaccurate data on "illegal populations" to sustain its own crisis narrative within a xenophobic European context. That the same agency both produces this data and serves as the primary actor in border enforcement raises acute concerns, chief among them the manipulation of categories: for example, by reframing potential refugees as "illegals" (Savatic et al. 2025). Such practices manufacture ad hoc crises that then justify protective interventions (Almustafa 2022) and entrench emergency logics over long-term planning, while legitimising and expanding Frontex's resources and authority (Campesi 2014).

In this way, Frontex reproduces narratives of acute and protracted crises, institutionalising emergency operations as the new norm by blurring the line between crisis and normality (Perkowski et al. 2023). This tendency is inscribed in the agency's foundational mandate, which rests on two incompatible objectives: preventing unauthorised crossings into Europe and rescuing people at risk of shipwreck. This contradiction is not incidental but reflects what Pallister-Wilkins (2017) calls the "care and control duality", an operational logic that shapes the EU's approach to the "migrant problem". These factors allow the agency to act in a context where political clarity on border management and surveillance is absent, rendering Frontex's discourse and activities paradoxical and unpredictable (see also Gkliati and Kilpatrick 2021; Salzano and Gkliati 2022).

According to its website, Frontex supports national authorities in tasks such as border checks, surveillance, detection of document and identity fraud, coast

guard functions, combatting cross-border crime, monitoring migratory flows, and countering human smuggling and trafficking. Yet these activities are often carried out with violence. Regulation (EU) 2016/1624 authorises the agency to use force, including service weapons, ammunition, and equipment, against anyone who approaches EU borders. The opaque implementation of such operations, coupled with the broad discretionary powers granted to Frontex, has led to numerous reports of human rights violations. The *Black Book of Pushbacks* (Barker and Zajović 2022) meticulously documents the violence perpetrated by the agency at Europe's external borders, while the NGO front-LEX has reported multiple violations, providing pro bono legal representation to victims.

Frontex's responsibilities in these practices can be traced on three levels. The first is at ground level: many militarised units carrying out pushbacks by sea and, especially, by land do not wear official uniforms, yet their training and access to technological tools point back to Frontex. The second concerns cooperation: as reported by Sea-Watch, radar and video evidence show Frontex aircraft and drones relaying the positions of boats attempting to reach the EU to national border authorities (such as Greece's) and to the so-called Libyan coast guard. These actors then intercept the boats, often with violence—including opening fire on passengers—before returning their human cargo to Libyan detention centres where beatings, rape, arbitrary killings, and other forms of abuse are routine (Viviano and Ziniti 2018). The third level involves knowledge and information exchange: Frontex and national border authorities are fully aware of each other's operations and collaborate to implement them. A July 2021 European Parliament report shows that Frontex knowingly concealed evidence of such violent rejections. As also documented by the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (2021:7–8), "the [then] head of Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri, ordered his fundamental rights officer to 'remove all information gathered' on a Category Four Serious Incidents report. The removed information pertained to a pushback that occurred in April 2020 during which 30 victims were dragged from Greek waters into Turkish waters by border agents during the night. A Frontex reconnaissance aircraft observed the process from the air near Lesvos". This incriminating evidence, showing collusion between Frontex and ground guards operating without visible identification, was suppressed and never officially reported.

The triangular relationship between Frontex, the European Union, and the militarisation of Europe's borders is therefore central. But there is another, often overlooked, player: academia. Despite the evidence above, academic institutions and individual researchers not only accept but also often actively seek collaboration with Frontex. Here, the dynamics of positivist dissonance are stark. Once a partnership is established, all other considerations seem to fall away. Under the banners of "research" and "teaching", academics seem to forget that by entering into collaboration with Frontex, they are only one step removed from the drone, the coast guard, and the military apparatus that enacts pushbacks at EU frontiers. As we show below, the problem is not merely one of opportunity or image. Rather, it concerns the profound cultural, economic, and social restructuring that positivist dissonance effects within academia. Universities gradually shift from

being spaces of critical inquiry to institutions that, under the guise of scientific discourse and the perceived positive role of "research", reinforce political mandates to securitise borders.

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader research project on the relationship between the military-industrial complex and the university sector. In it, we dedicated time to unpack the role of the defence sector in Italian universities, which resulted in a pamphlet widely circulated in Italian student protest encampments against the genocide of the Palestinian people (Lancione 2023). In this paper, we expand that work, zooming in on Frontex, for its increased relevance in the militarisation of Europe and its borders. Our methodology is based on literature reviews, original document analysis, direct data collection from EU databases, participant observation (in the case of our Polytechnic), and participation in activism in academic and student resistance movements in Italy.

Document analysis was conducted by accessing European legislation, institutional reports, and official websites of Frontex and other governmental organisations such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the EU's law-enforcement agency (Europol), and the Joint Research Centre (JRC).

The bulk of our research covers two focal points where Frontex enters a relationship with public universities. The first regards the European Framework Programmes. For that, projects from Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe listed on the agency's website were initially selected, regardless of their status—active or completed. Subsequently, searches were conducted on the European Commission's Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS) platform to gather details about each project. A database was then created with information on the projects, including participating institutions and their countries, goals, and costs. This is a living database that we continue to update as new projects emerge. The second concerns Frontex's Education and Training Activities. Here, the two main programmes were selected: the Frontex Research Grants Programme and the European Joint Master's in Strategic Border Management (EJMSBM).

In relation to the case involving our institution, data derives from participant observation and direct action undertaken by the four of us at different moments together with students and activists in Turin and beyond, as well as some colleagues at the Polytechnic, the University of Turin, and other universities across Italy and Europe. The overall methodological impetus of the paper follows our direct involvement in resisting the militarisation of the university, and we see this first paper as a contribution towards a deeper understanding of these processes.

We are conscious that writing a paper of this kind might entail consequences for our professional lives at a time when, both in Italy and internationally, universities are under attack. Two of us—Giulia and Michele—are currently employed at the Polytechnic of Turin, though only one of us has formal job security. We have thought long and hard about our intention to publish this work in a leading

international journal, choosing to list ourselves in alphabetical order and not to use pseudonyms. Ultimately, we collectively reached this decision, confident in our findings and moved by the idea that universities must be preserved as sites of both critical thinking and discourse. This is only possible if academics openly begin to question their workplaces—this paper is our modest attempt to contribute to such a conversation.

The Role of Frontex in Research

Relationships between Frontex and academia operate at different scales and with varying degrees of intensity. At the most basic level, universities *engage directly* with the agency itself. According to the Corporate Europe Observatory, a research group monitoring corporations and their lobbying influence on EU policy making, between 2017 and 2019, Frontex met with representatives of 138 bodies: 108 companies, 10 think tanks, one non-governmental organisation, and 15 universities (Douo et al. 2021). No human rights organisations were present during those meetings. Instead, several universities sought "research" opportunities linked to the advanced technological (military) apparatus mobilised by Frontex. In its 2018 report "From Lab to Field: Challenges and Opportunities for Operationalising Border Security Research", Frontex explicitly positioned research—and, by extension, universities—as service providers for border security agencies within a service-oriented ethos (Frontex 2018). In this way, higher education is reconfigured as service provision, in the process becoming entangled in Europe's border management apparatus. Before turning to specific cases, it is important to highlight the broader cultural, societal, and economic structures at the EU level that make such arrangements possible. The first is a 2020 agreement between Frontex and the European Commission, which formalised the agency's role in the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. This agreement institutionalised a close partnership and reframed research as a joint, goal-oriented effort (EC and Frontex 2020). As a result, Frontex has been enabled to participate directly in the management and development of Horizon projects.[1] According to Frontex, its contributions include "diverse, numerous and user-perspective contributions to the EU funded border security research projects: feedback on projects, participation in Horizon project reviews, meetings, workshops and demonstrations, facilitation of interaction with Frontex operational departments and initiation of common endeavours, and dissemination of the projects [sic] content and results to the EBCG community" (Frontex 2023a:11).

Second, every three years Frontex publishes a detailed International Cooperation Strategy outlining priorities for the three years that follow. Since 2021, EBCG's stance on research and innovation has been explicitly guided by these reports, which directly align with the political stances on the union's European Integrated Border Management (EIBM) agenda. The 2021–2023 strategy declared the agency's intention to deepen its role in research and innovation by developing synergies "through the EU Framework Programme for Research, where Frontex supports the Commission in assessing, evaluating, monitoring and

implementing EU financed Horizon research projects in the field of border security" (Frontex 2021:36). The most recent strategy, covering 2024–2026, further underlines this trajectory, stating that "[c]ooperation will also cover research projects that focus on the development and use of technology for improving border security" (Frontex 2024a:28). Thus, the growing prominence of research is clearly reflected in its agenda.

Third, Frontex's research capabilities are expanded through its partnership with the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's science and knowledge service. This collaboration focuses on analysing emerging technological solutions for border security within the framework of European Integrated Border Management. In its report "Weak Signals in Border Management and Surveillance Technologies" (Joint Research Centre 2022), the JRC examined 11 border-control-oriented technologies. The service provided by the JRC is valuable not only for identifying future research priorities and advancing border technology research but also, as the agency has stated, for "identify[ing] the industrial and academic institutions involved in research on specific themes and as such will facilitate contact [with] relevant entities dealing with these technologies" (Frontex 2023b). Therefore, the 2022 report illustrates how Frontex identifies knowledge providers and channels economic resources towards research assignments while also engaging in reputation laundering.

Against this backdrop, Frontex has been directly involved in 37 Horizon projects. At the time of writing, 18 projects are ongoing and 19 have concluded. The European Commission has fully funded 19 projects (51.4%) and partially funded the remaining 18 (48.6%). For the latter, EU contributions range from 75.2% to 99.7% of total costs, with the balance covered by project partners. Of the 37 projects, 32 involve partnerships with universities, both public and private. Project costs range from €3,035,260.50 (CosmoPort Project) to €7,477,390.02 (SafeTravellers Project). In total, 68 universities participate in the 32 projects: one university in four projects, six universities in three projects each, 13 universities in two each, and 48 universities in a single project. Below, we highlight a few cases from our data set that exemplify key dynamics broadly representative of the wider set.

Horizon Research and Frontex

The first case is NESTOR—"aN Enhanced pre-frontier intelligence picture to Safeguard The EurOpean boRders". Launched in November 2021 and concluded in April 2023, the project was partially funded under Horizon 2020, with an EU contribution of €4,999,578.13 (82% of the total €6,108,593.75) through the stream "Secure Societies—Protecting Freedom and Security of Europe and Its Citizens". The project was coordinated by the Hellenic Police together with two universities: the University of Oulu (Finland) and Sheffield Hallam University (UK). These academic institutions played a central role in developing technologies "for detection, recognition, classification and tracking of moving targets (e.g. persons, vessels, vehicles, drones etc.) … based on optical, thermal imaging and Radio Frequency (RF) spectrum analysis technologies" (CORDIS 2024a). Several defence-related

institutions also participated, including the Bulgarian Main Directorate of the Border Police, the Greek Center for Security Studies (KEMEA), Satways Ltd (Greece), and the Spanish Systems Engineering for the Defence of Spain S.A., SME, and MP. The project was implemented in three Eastern European border countries—Lithuania, Cyprus, and Greece—selected for their heightened visibility following the 2015 "migration crisis".

With regard to the Greek–Bulgarian land and maritime border, NESTOR focused on "improv[ing] the long-range surveillance capabilities in the Orestiada area, border area of Evros Delta and Samothraki Island" (Frontex 2023b). Moreover, "Frontex was invited to join the execution of the second phase of the Greek–Bulgarian pilot—border area of Evros Delta" (ibid.). These sites are all located in the Evros region, notorious for the deadly violence at the Greece–Turkey border, repeatedly denounced by grassroots organisers and academics (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2019; Laakkonen 2023; Mavroudas et al. 2024). NESTOR is also notable for its "pre-frontier" application. The project aimed to "demonstrate a fully functional next-generation holistic border surveillance system providing pre-frontier situational awareness beyond maritime and land borders" (Frontex 2022). This means that its scope was to expand surveillance to pre-border territories, extending European securitisation systems to track potential "threats" across Europe's externalised borderlands. While the project criminalises migrants by linking irregular migration flows to transnational crime, such framing is unsurprising given the involvement of military-related institutions and Frontex, which routinely reproduce these unfounded associations.

The project documentation also mentions that smugglers increasingly resort to arduous routes, "hindered by mountainous, densely forested areas and rough lands aside with sea or river areas" (CORDIS 2024a). Presented without context, this claim served as a key justification for the project's existence: to better understand emerging "pre-frontiers" where migrant movements are anticipated or imagined. Yet this depiction is both partial and problematic as it reifies migrant and asylum seeker flows as disconnected from the policing practices that shape them (Campesi 2018). As countless third-sector organisations and grassroots networks along the Balkan route, such as the Border Violence Monitoring Network and RiVolti ai Balcani, have reported, migrants take such perilous paths precisely because of Europe's militarised border regime. Within a positivist framework, the role of academia once again becomes that of providing tangible "solutions" (pre-frontier detection) to tangible "problems" (so-called crimmigrant flows). By participating in a project like NESTOR, European universities legitimise Frontex's narratives and frameworks, ultimately reinforcing them through deceptive confirmatory data provided by the agency itself and validated through academic channels.

A second project and illustrative example involving Frontex is CRiTERIA—"Comprehensive data-driven Risk and Threat Assessment Methods for the Early and Reliable Identification, Validation and Analysis of migration-related risks". Fully funded by Horizon Europe with a budget of €4,890,177.50 (CORDIS 2024b), the project ran between September 2021 and August 2024. Coordinated by Leibniz University Hannover (Germany), it involved several higher education institutions,

including the University of Groningen (Netherlands), the University of Malta, and European University Cyprus. A distinctive element of CRiTERIA is the participation of ARSIS, the Association for the Social Support of Youth, an NGO working with at-risk youth, including migrant and asylum-seeking young people. The involvement of ARSIS highlights the "humanitarian borderwork" (Rumford 2006) discussed in the introduction: NGOs, alongside universities, provide cultural validation that helps legitimise the EU border regime. This case illustrates the intricacy of border-making and the multiple actors (including academia) that together constitute and reinforce Europe's borders.

From the outset, the project establishes a direct link between migration, criminality, and the supposed need for securitisation. CRiTERIA's website claims that EU borders are facing increasing threats from "illegal migration" and human trafficking, citing the Frontex Risk Analysis 2020 to substantiate this view (CRiTERIA 2024). Yet, as Savatic et al. (2025) have shown and we have previously highlighted, Frontex's data are often inaccurate and shaped by xenophobic biases aligned with the strategic interests of Fortress Europe. This produces a circular logic: data generated by Frontex are used to justify securitising projects, which such projects in turn validate the agency's narrative. Horii (2016) has astutely deconstructed Frontex's narrative-building, showing how the agency links migration and security through language specific to a migrant-hostile political context. The use of such reports in this project, in which several universities are taking part, is therefore troubling, as it helps legitimise these representations. Validation is effective because it is embedded in project design and reinforced through the dissemination of deliverables.

The consequences are not merely epistemic but also material. According to the project description, one of its main aims is "to strengthen and expand existing risk analysis methods, by introducing novel approaches" (CRiTERIA 2024). However, it is difficult to understand what these "novel approaches" entail because the identification of risk factors in CRiTERIA is guided by "narrative analysis" and the use of "sentiment indicators to predict behaviour", alongside "risk interaction and risk cascading assessments" and the integration of "human security and human rights dimensions of border security" (ibid.). Cloaked in jargon, the project's aims nonetheless invite questions about what such an approach might be and what it could reproduce. Because "narrative analysis" is central to the project and relies on Frontex's risk analysis data, and because Frontex itself is a project partner, the research is unlikely to provide any narrative other than the agency's own framing of the "migration crisis". The methodological foundation of the research endeavour already forecloses alternative perspectives. Perhaps Frontex's framing is indeed correct, but by abdicating a priori the possibility of *actually asking the research question*, one will never know, and the university will be reduced to being a service provider for the highest bidder.

Frontex Research Grants Programme

Beyond its participation in the Horizon projects, in 2022 Frontex launched the Frontex Research Grants Programme to "pursue an even closer cooperation with

non-profit organisations and academia" (Frontex 2024b). Between September 2023 and August 2024, it funded four projects related to land and maritime border security.

The highest-ranked project is TUTELARY—"CoasTal sUrveillance sysTem ExpLoiting photonics-bAsed Radar securitY". The beneficiary is the Italian National Interuniversity Consortium for Telecommunications (CNIT), which brings together 42 universities. TUTELARY seeks to develop a coastal surveillance system based on multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) photonic radar designed to operate in real time in port areas to identify small motorised and non-motorised vessels (e.g. powerboats, rowboats, etc.) that could be used for illicit activities, including human trafficking or potential terrorist operations (Frontex and CNIT 2023).

Like any standard research grant, Frontex provides a "Grant Agreement" for each project it finances, including a document outlining the rights and obligations of all parties. Particularly revealing is the section on contractual obligations. Using the TUTELARY Grant Agreement as an example, the following extract is representative of grants issued directly by the agency:

> About IPR rights, it was explained that the ownership of what is developed within the project is of the beneficiary, but Frontex has the right to use the project results (and the pre-existing rights included in the results). In case of publications related to the project activity, a proper "identifier for publicity" acknowledging Frontex co-funding has to be written. The identifier will be provided by RIU [Frontex's Research and Innovation Unit]. Before publishing any result, it is warmly suggested to share the content with RIU in advance in order to guarantee consistency and quality of results. (Frontex 2023c:3)

In essence, although this resembles standard practice in commercially driven research partnerships (i.e. the university partner formally owns the results, while Frontex retains usage rights), this is not a standard, commercially driven research partnership. Frontex is neither neutral nor simply profit-driven. It operates under a political mandate and through the contradictions discussed earlier in the paper, which have already drawn scrutiny and criticism from activists, NGOs, the European Parliament, and the EU Court of Justice. Given all of this, it is deeply troubling that academic institutions grant Frontex broad discretionary power over research conducted in educational settings. This reflects not only an unconscious or unexamined dissonance but one institutionally sanctioned by the university. At the time of writing, Frontex has launched the call for its 2024 Research Grants, but projects have yet to be selected for funding. In the funding call, there is a section dedicated to a Q&A session that occurred during the presentation of grant opportunities on 16 May 2024. During this event, a potential applicant asked, "In regard to intellectual property rights, could you please elaborate on the rights of use of the results by Frontex, especially on 'reproduction'?" and Frontex replied, "'Reproduction' relates mostly to the reproduction of the documents of the project (for example, the Research Report), although in certain cases it may refer to the reproduction of the actual technological solution" (Frontex 2024c:7). Given this response, we argue that the possibility of reproducing "the actual

technological solution" implies a potential transfer of technological solutions into a Frontex-related—and thus more military-led—domain.

European Joint Master's in Strategic Border Management

Frontex is also involved in teaching. In 2012, it launched the European Joint Master's in Strategic Border Management (EJMSBM), designed to establish a common European border and coast guard culture and to promote interoperability at Europe's external borders (Juknyte-Petreikiene et al. 2021). The programme seeks to close the gap between operational needs and the academic world by creating an ad hoc education for border guards. It was developed by a working group led by Frontex and composed of more than 80 academics and border guards from several European countries (Frontex 2023d). Although the programme is oriented exclusively towards security, it maintains partnerships with non-military universities.

In May 2014, four academic institutions—the Latvian Rezekne Higher Education Institution, the Lithuanian Mykolas Romeris University, the Spanish National University for Distance Education, and the University of Salamanca—signed a Framework Partnership Agreement with Frontex to implement the programme. These institutions collaborated closely with national border guard academies, including the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee Training and Expertise Center, the Latvian State Border Guard College, the Spanish Guardia Civil Officers' Academy, the Spanish National Police Force, the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, and the Netherlands Defence Academy Faculty of Military Science (Frontex 2017).

In 2023, a call for proposals was issued to implement the EJMSBM for the 2024–2028 period. It was open to European higher academic institutions willing to deliver the degree. Selected universities would receive a joint award with an operating budget of €990,000 for a single iteration, potentially reaching €2,970,000 for three. At the time of writing, the results had not yet been published. Though still relatively new, the EJMSBM illustrates how Frontex's involvement with universities extends beyond research into the latter's core mandate of teaching. We now turn to another dimension of this relationship: our institution's direct involvement in service provision through public tender.

Frontex and the Polytechnic of Turin

The Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) at the Polytechnic of Turin, where some of us are based, collaborates with Frontex. Unlike the Horizon-funded programmes mentioned earlier, this collaboration, framed as a research initiative, does not entail actual research activities. Rather, it constitutes service provision. In 2021, a professor at DIST, in partnership with the company Ithaca, won a Frontex tender to produce digital cartography, infographics, and map books that would be "useful for the agency's activities" (to quote the tender call). The contract had an initial duration of 24 months,

renewable for another 24, with a total budget of €4 million (the renewal was awarded). In a press release, the then Vice-Chancellor for Research at the Polytechnic and President of Associazione Ithaca (recently elected Chancellor of the Polytechnic) stated that "the collaboration with Frontex represents the first example of how the ecosystem of the Politecnico di Torino, represented by its Departments and by the system of owned foundation and companies, *can be functional to the full integration between research and technology transfer activities*" (Poliflash 2021, our emphasis).

Colleagues involved in producing cartographies for Frontex have described their outputs as "harmless" maps. Yet, there are two possible levels of analysis here. The first concerns the product itself (i.e. the maps), and the second concerns the broader meaning of the working relationship. With regard to the product, it is untenable to claim that maps are harmless, not only because data are never neutral and maps are always subjective (Van Houtum 2024) but also because our colleagues cannot control how Frontex will ultimately use the outputs of their work. According to a copy of the contract between DIST, Ithaca, and Frontex that we obtained, Frontex may use the maps not only for representative purposes but also for "analysis". Moreover, the maps can cover virtually any global location, at Frontex's discretion, and can be produced at very large scales, down to individual buildings, as the contract specifies. Finally, the data sets underpinning map production are not only open source but also supplied by Frontex through its border control work. In essence, our department can be tasked with producing highly detailed maps based on Frontex data, which the agency can then use for analysis in pursuit of its objectives. Knowing the history and aims of the client, it is difficult to regard this service as "harmless". The positivist dissonance lies in concealing complicity behind the supposed neutrality of scientific data.

The issues become even more troubling when we shift from the product itself to the broader implications of the working relationship between the Polytechnic and Frontex. Two elements are particularly important. First, Frontex's maps are not only valued for analysis but also repurposed as "infographics". These cartographic representations are central to the agency's communication strategy: maps of the Mediterranean basin marked by bold red arrows emanating from sub-Saharan Africa, pointing towards the Italian and Greek coasts and extending into continental Europe. Such representations are discursive, telling a story of *invasion*, which is politically significant for *militarisation* and sustains Europe's "war" on uncontrolled migration flows. Frontex's budget depends on this narrative and its political utility: by fostering the perception of an ongoing invasion, the agency secures public support for the allocation of billions of taxpayers' euros to its operations. Yet the available data clearly show that neither Europe nor Italy faces an uncontrolled influx of refugees. If the red arrows on Frontex's maps were proportional to the actual number of migrants per route relative to host country population, they would be almost invisible (Cobarrubias 2025; Gomis 2022).

Second, as noted earlier, the Polytechnic's collaboration with Frontex is service provision, *not* research. It is not a space where uncomfortable questions can be raised nor one where the broader meaning and implications of the work can be

interrogated. Within the terms of this service relationship, the Polytechnic cannot critically engage with or comment on Frontex's activities. At the same time, this collaboration grants Frontex cultural and social legitimacy it might not otherwise obtain. Although completely capable of producing its own maps, the agency outsources to a prestigious public research institution because it is buying not only a service but also an endorsement. Once affiliated with the university, these maps are framed and validated as "scientific" and, by extension, positioned as beyond reproach.

On these grounds, some of us resisted the implementation of the agreement. In July 2021, when the deal was presented at a departmental staff meeting, only three professors (among them Michele) openly questioned the decisions. The agreement later became the subject of a series of inquiries by journalist Luca Rondi of the Italian magazine *Altreconomia*. Following this, Michele published a public letter of protest (no other professors at DIST signed). Strategically building on the media attention it generated, Michele sought to amplify pressure through articles and interviews with national and international outlets—a move soon taken up by other critical voices beyond the department. Spearheaded by students and precarious researchers at DIST, including Devra, Giulia, and Patrícia, demonstrations, collective assemblies, and mobilisations were organised in Turin and elsewhere to push the institution to terminate the contract. Student and activist participation on a national scale was extensive and significant. Thanks to this external pressure, the Academic Senate of the Polytechnic agreed to reconsider the agreement at an extraordinary meeting in December 2021.

Three options were available: termination, suspension, or continuation of the agreement with the addition of a hypothetical "safeguard clause", under which DIST, Ithaca, the Polytechnic, and Frontex would be required to respect human rights in the contract's execution. By a large majority (21 out of 25), the Senate opted to maintain the contract with this clause. Either the Senate believed the Polytechnic could exert control over Frontex in ways that even the European Court of Justice has been unable to achieve, or it sought to avoid confronting an issue that risked opening a Pandora's box. Severing ties with Frontex would have exposed contradictions in the institution's extensive relationships with Leonardo, Italy's biggest arms producer, and with the many other military-related industries with which it collaborates. The dissonance here stems not only from a positivist understanding of science but also from a strategic effort to defend this way of doing science. It should also be noted that a few months later, journalist Luca Rondi, through a freedom of information request to Frontex, discovered that the agency knew nothing of this safeguard clause: the contract proceeded without it, and without further objection from the Polytechnic.

Meanwhile, the department continued producing maps for Frontex during a period in which the agency was under heavy scrutiny, culminating in the resignation of its executive director in 2022. At this stage, opposition was less publicly visible but persisted on many other fronts, especially through the increasingly active involvement of the PhD community in our department and of colleagues at the University of Turin (DIST, as an interuniversity department, is also partly under

its jurisdiction). Thanks to their efforts, in November 2022 the University of Turin's Board of Directors endorsed a formal motion asking the Polytechnic to terminate the agreement. Yet even this was not enough. Following the motion, in December 2022 the Polytechnic's Senate reconsidered the issue and, with 19 of 29 members in favour, again voted to maintain the agreement. Another instance of positivist dissonance: collaboration with Frontex treated as a purely technical, innocuous matter, something detached from the agency's practices and from our responsibilities as academics.

Conclusion

Relationships between European universities and Frontex are extensive but occur mainly in three forms: partnerships in Horizon projects; collaborations on specific research programmes or service provision launched and managed directly by Frontex; and teaching programmes either offered by the agency or designed in partnership with higher education institutions. The cases discussed in this paper confirm the readiness of European academia to serve Frontex, and the broader regime of violent border control it represents, by providing resources, knowledge, and cultural legitimacy. This relationship not only challenges conventional understandings of borders as fixed, topographical facts but also contributes to their repositioning within a fluid, topological framework. In so doing, it situates academia itself within this topology of borders, embedding academic spaces and their subjects as cogs in bordering mechanisms often perceived as "out there" but, in fact, enacted "right here".

The technification of borders is central to the positivist dissonance we have traced, where decontextualised and deracinated technical solutions are devised for problems that exist because they have been politically constructed, such as the manufactured "migrant crisis" that helped give rise to Frontex's current form. Crucially, this technification allows such work to proceed without ever having to critically engage with the political and ideological frameworks that created the problem in the first place. Over the past four years, we have worked alongside anti-racist and critical migration activists and students across Italy. At every occasion, whether in collective study seminars, direct actions, or encampments, we have reflected on the limited presence of academics, especially permanent staff, in these spaces. In recent months, during the genocide perpetrated by Israel in Palestine, which is still ongoing, we have observed a troubling silence around academia's complicity (with the notable exception of Maya Wind's 2024 book on the role of Israeli universities) in efforts to maintain and reproduce these forms of structural violence. This silence has been broken too late, with insufficient consequence (Mezzadra and Neilson 2024), and by only a handful of voices, including Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories. Albanese has consistently denounced the genocide of the Palestinian people, also highlighting the role of universities in sustaining the Israeli military-industrial complex (Albanese 2025; Albanese and Elia 2023).

Against this backdrop, in this paper we have asked ourselves why academia is increasingly less a place where difficult questions can be asked and the world critically interrogated, and it is instead turning more and more into a space that sells services and institutional legitimacy to an agency embroiled in the thousands of deaths that have come to define the Black Mediterranean. These concerns cannot be reduced to individual ignorance (though many colleagues excused their inaction by claiming they were unaware of what Frontex is or does). The problem lies in the structural, strategic positivist dissonance within which we are compelled to work: a mode of knowledge production premised on individualised detachment, embedded in a commodified understanding of "science" and the related neoliberal academic spaces. This dissonance is reproduced in the unnoticed, everyday violence of staff meetings where agreements are approved unread, and where academics become detached paper-pushers, as if what is pushed or written does not belong to us.

But it does. The "military-industrial-academic complex" includes border-regime apparatuses in which EU universities and their staff are deeply implicated. Horizon projects like NESTOR and CRiTERIA reinforce depictions of the criminal, racialised, and illegalised "other" to be pushed back at Europe's frontiers or in pre-frontier zones through hyper-developed technologies deployable on borderlands and developed within universities themselves. Our department, and the Polytechnic as a whole, has no real control over how Frontex uses the maps produced. More importantly, our institution cannot detach itself from the epistemic legitimisation it confers upon the agency through partnership. This complicity exposes a profound contradiction: we continue to enter classrooms and present ourselves as credible teachers of anti-colonial and anti-racist thought, while simultaneously working hand-in-hand with one of the EU's principal actors in border violence. Through partnership, knowledge exchange, and the production of material technologies, universities become complicit in the legitimisation and operationalisation of confinement, shielded by the reassuring veneer of scientific research and innovation.

To address these material, political, and epistemic issues, salaried academics must account not only for violent regimes of othering "out there" but also for how these regimes are fostered by and reproduced in academic spaces. Grounded in our own direct actions, we call on scholars to interrogate the role and positioning of universities vis-à-vis the EU border regime, beginning by challenging and dismantling the positivist dissonance that sustains these relations. To call for a university without the military, without ties to genocidal states, and without Frontex is not to diminish "academic freedom" (as claimed by chancellors and Italy's Ministry of University and Research). It is, rather, the first step in resisting the sell-off of that freedom, and in preserving the university as a cultural, social, and economic space where study is not complicit in racialised death, not even by liminal association.

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emerged in 2021. With these groups we subsequently continued to oppose the militarisation of our universities and the complicity of Italian academic institutions with the Israeli military–industrial complex and its genocidal project in Palestine. We treasure the solidarities that emerged in and out of academia throughout these recent years. We are also grateful to journalist Luca Rondi for pursuing the Frontex case with care and dedication and to the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful insights. Open access publishing facilitated by Politecnico di Torino, as part of the Wiley - CRUI-CARE agreement.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There are no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnote

[1] The EU's main research funding programme, with a budget of €93.5 billion for 2021–2027.

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